

FIRE AWAY: PLAYING COP IN SOMALIA AND BOSNIA

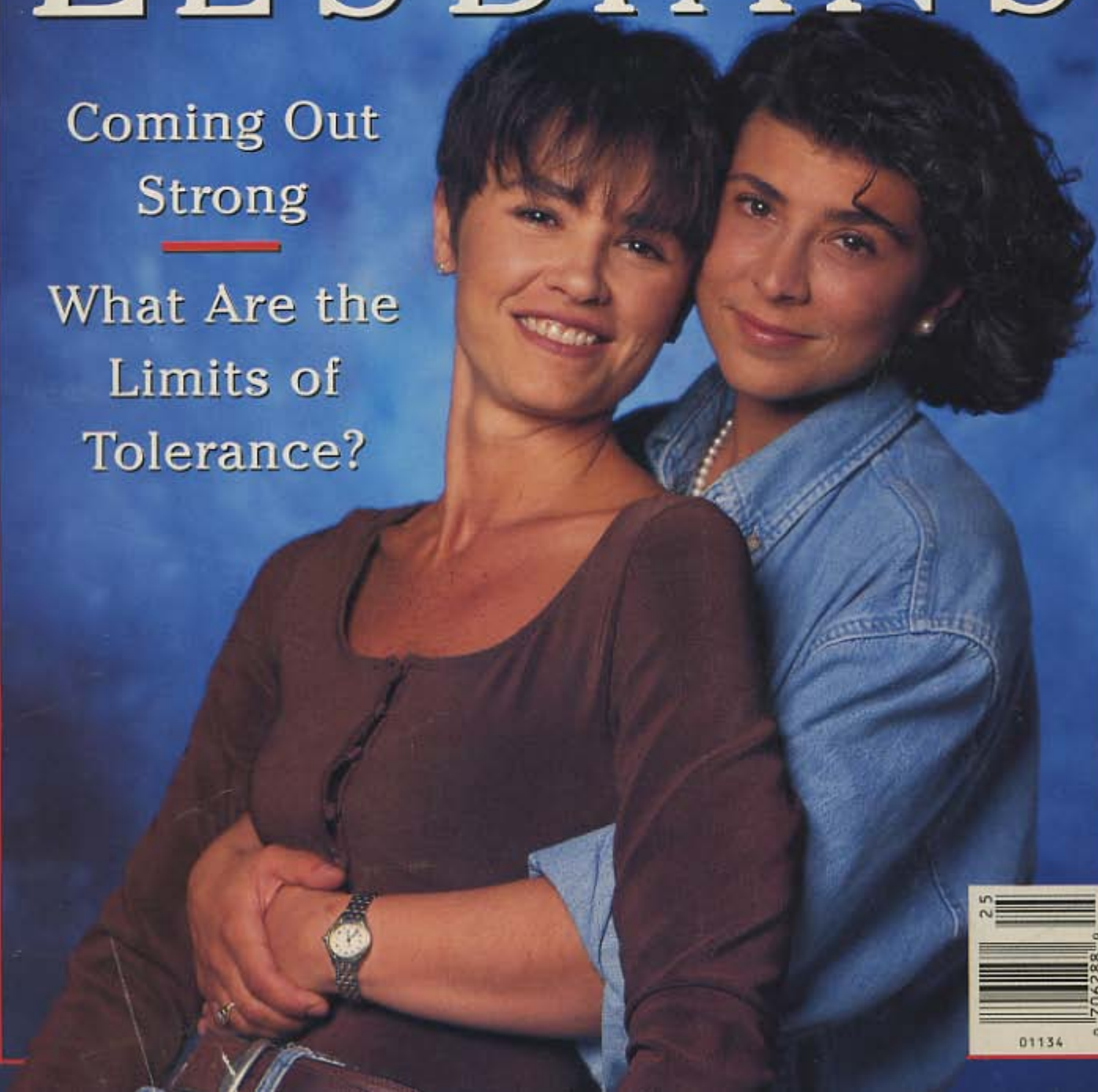
# Newsweek

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## LESBIANS

Coming Out  
Strong

What Are the  
Limits of  
Tolerance?



# THE POWER A

**T**wo, four, six, eight, how do you know your grandma's straight?" the women chanted, many thousands strong, on the eve of the recent gay- and lesbian-rights march in Washington. There were, in fact, lots of grandmotherly types proceeding down Connecticut Avenue that spring evening, along with bare-breasted teenagers in overalls, aging baby boomers in Birkenstocks and bald biker dykes in from the Coast. Advertising execs strode arm in arm with electricians, architects with politicians. As onlookers pondered the stereotype-defying scene, the demonstrators reveled in their sheer numbers. It was, for once, an unabashed display of lesbian clout.

Lesbians have always been the invisible homosexuals.

There are an estimated 2 million to 3 million of them in the United States—far fewer than the approximately 5 percent of the population represented by gay men. Activists believe that most lesbians haven't come out. But now, during the dawning of the "Gay '90s," these women are stepping front and center. From the studios of Hollywood to the hearing rooms of the Capitol, lesbians suddenly seem to be out of the closet and in your face. Last June, country singer k. d. lang came out to *The Advocate*, a bi-weekly gay magazine, giving new meaning to her hit "Constant Craving." Avowed bisexual Sandra Bernhard took her place in the "Roseanne" lineup, playing the lesbian co-owner of a sandwich shop opposite actress Morgan Fairchild. "We're like the Evian water of the '90s," stand-up comic Suzanne Westenhoefer says wryly. "Everybody wants to know a lesbian or to be with a lesbian or just to dress like one."

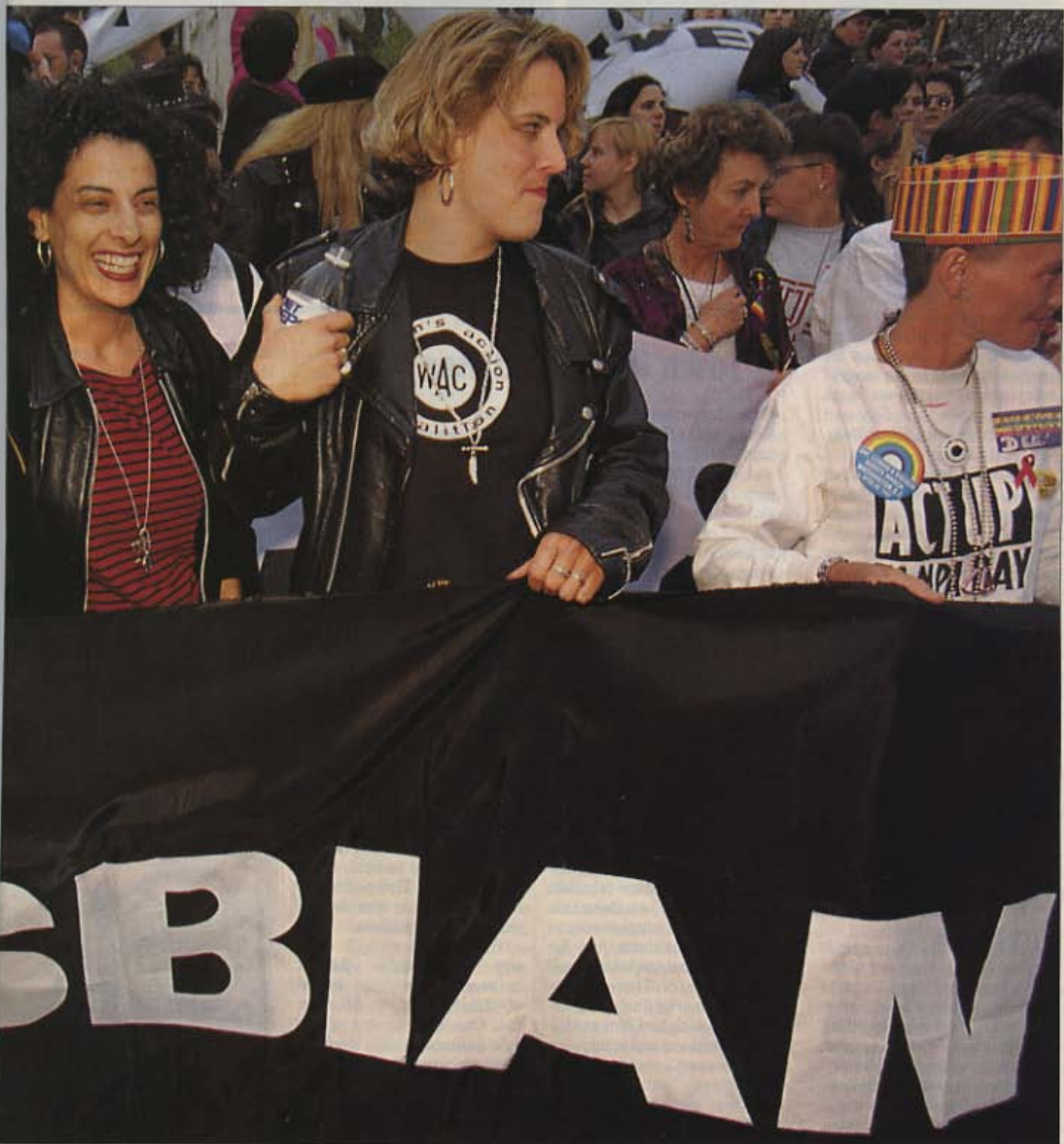
Why now? As conservatives are quick to note, the election of Bill Clinton contributed to this open atmosphere. Though many homosexuals feel let down by his waffling on the military ban (page 60), they give him credit for being the first president to acknowledge gays and lesbians, let alone promote them. Last month former San Francisco supervisor Roberta Achtenberg became an assistant secretary of housing and urban development—and the first open homosexual ever confirmed by the U.S. Senate for political office. In the end, however, the new lesbian presence has as much to do with women power as gay power. "Sometimes I think it's like the year of the woman squared," says lesbian comic Kate Clinton (no relation to the president). "It's sort of like the year of the woman loving woman."

Yet lesbians are still struggling to define themselves polit-

**Lesbians have long been the invisible homosexuals, but now they're coming out strong. What are the limits of tolerance?**



# ND THE PRIDE



PORTER GIFFORD—GAMMA-LIAISON



GARY WAGNER—PICTURE GROUP

Wielding real political power: HUD's Roberta Achtenberg

ically and socially. "Are we the women's part of the gay movement or the lesbian part of the women's movement?" muses Torie Osborn, the head of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) in Washington. Obviously, they are both. Lesbian activists have toiled in behalf of issues—notably, AIDS and abortion—that are unlikely to affect them directly. "We have for years and years taken care of everybody but ourselves," says Ellen Carton of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD).

Now lesbians are determined to cast off their role as handmaidens to other activists and stake their own claims. It won't be so easy. For all their new pride, lesbians face a lot of old prejudice. The emergence of openly lesbian couples—publicly affectionate or with their children—may test the limits of America's uneasy tolerance of homosexuality. Even many liberals who watched C-Span's unexpurgated coverage of the gay-rights march were offended by the spectacle of some women—albeit from the lesbian fringes—who were kissing or half naked. More mainstream lesbians themselves worry about the dangers of visibility. A look at some of the gains, goals and battles:

**ACTIVISM:** "I'm a little amused at this renewed interest in lesbians," says Urvashi Vaid, former executive director of NGLTF. Vaid, who is writing a book about the gay-rights movement, notes that lesbians have played a prominent role in many social fights, from abolition and temperance to civil rights. Like gays generally,

## A Town Like No Other

Country-music fans gravitate to the Grand Ole Opry, painters dream of Provence and ski bums settle in Aspen. Lesbians have a mecca, too. It's Northampton, Mass., a.k.a. Lesbianville, U.S.A. In a profile of the town last year, the National Enquirer claimed that "10,000 cuddling, kissing lesbians call it home sweet home." While no one really knows how many of Northampton's 30,000 residents are homosexual women (the best guess is one in 10 women), lesbians are clearly an important and somewhat controversial presence. "It's more an issue of visibility than numbers," says Mayor Mary L. Ford, who is straight but has many lesbian supporters.

Every Monday night, the town's cable station telecasts "Out & About," a lesbian talk show. Lesbian tourists stay at bed and breakfasts just for women. Local bookstores sell lesbian erotica. There are five colleges nearby (including all-female Smith and Mount Holyoke); lesbians and academics are the town's major cultural influences. Lesbians run a summer festival that draws

thousands of women from around the country. All year long, there are regular performances by lesbian singers and comics. "If you're looking for lesbians, they're everywhere," says Diane Morgan, codirector of the festival.

Northampton has been a lesbian haven since the late 1970s. Many of the pioneers were Smith and Mount Holyoke alumnae attracted by cheap living and a tolerant community. Friends followed, revitalizing the aging downtown with cafes and hip clubs. "I came because I wanted to meet other women like me," says Aliza Ansell, 34. In the early '80s, says Ansell, a codirector of the arts festival, the Zeitgeist was different: it was a "pretty radical, scary community." The politically correct uniform was flannel shirts and work boots.

That intensity survives in some parts of Northampton. One women's bookstore, Lunaria, still won't carry any books by men.

**Safe at home:** Morgan (left) and her lover Kristen Cichocki



But many lesbians say that there are so many of their own in Northampton that they now feel relaxed enough to dress any way they want and read anything they want. "In this town, you don't have to wear your sexuality like a flag," says Morgan, who wears her hair in a blond bob and uses lipstick. "You don't need





ALLAN TANENBAUM—SYGMA

they are better educated than the overall population. But they have operated, by and large, from the closet. And when some of them tried to come out, it was their straight sisters who slammed the door shut. During the 1970s, the NOW (National Organization for Women) leadership purged open lesbians, lest their presence somehow taint the movement. They still worked for the cause—often under the nom de guerre "radical feminists"—but the rebuff caused a good deal of bitterness. Today lesbians can take some measure of vindication from the appointment of Patricia Ireland, who has both a husband and a woman lover, as NOW president.

The '80s brought the devastation of AIDS, and with it a partial healing of an old rift between male and female homosexuals. For many lesbians, the bottom line about gays has always been that they are men, and often sexist to boot. "Straight men at least have an incentive to pretend they respect women," jokes Hillary Rosen, vice president of the Recording Industry of America and a member of the board of directors of the Human Rights Campaign Fund, a

**Riding high:** At a lesbian and gay pride rally in New York

lobbying group. Yet many gay men now recognize the debt they owe lesbians, who embraced the cause of AIDS as their own. Lesbians, many of whom belonged to such "caring" professions as nursing and social work, helped start health-care networks. They lobbied for policy change and protested when it didn't happen fast enough.

"AIDS did knit us into family," says Vaid. "Before, we existed in parallel worlds."

New fissures, however, have begun to show. While few lesbians would argue that it was wrong to rally round the AIDS fight, there have been rumblings about the need to refocus their energies. Lesbians consider themselves victims of both homophobia and sexism. Some issues now on the table, like the military ban, speak to the homosexuality of lesbians. Others are women's issues, such as pay equity, day care and the ERA. Some overlap, becoming in the process uniquely theirs. "Take reproductive freedom," says New York state legislator Deborah Glick, a lesbian. "It brings up areas of family law that haven't been dealt with, like artificial insemination." Lesbians have also begun demanding more money for research on breast cancer—a worry for all women but, because of its increased risk with childlessness, a particular concern among homosexuals.

But questions about how to reach their goals, and who will lead, continue to bedevil lesbian activists. Like the gay-rights movement generally, the lesbian ranks embody people of different colors, class, education and culture; their issues aren't always the same. Should lesbians pour money into mainstream lobbying groups, or take to the streets with the Lesbian

the uniform to be able to spot each other in a crowd."

Motherhood was once taboo, but now, more and more Northampton lesbians are having babies, usually through artificial insemination. There are parenting classes and a day-care center for children of lesbian mothers. One of the more fa-

mous residents, Lesléa Newman, wrote "Heather Has Two Mommies," the book that was used to bring down New York City Schools Chancellor Joseph Fernandez. Newman got the idea after a lesbian mother stopped her as she was walking past and asked her to write a book she could read to her daughters. "Only in Northampton," says Newman, "would a woman know who I was on the street and ask me a question like that."

**Media 'hype':** At Smith, the lesbian "invasion" has been a public-relations minefield. Although she supports the college's own lesbian community, Smith president Mary Maples Dunn has criticized the media for overemphasizing the lesbian presence on campus and in town. There have been numerous complaints from alumnae about more lurid stories, such as the *Enquirer's*, but Smith officials say contributions are down only slightly. They deny the drop is related to publicity about lesbians. At the same time, they say, applications are at a record high.

Some residents say lesbians have become too visible. "You can see them making love almost anywhere," says Caroline

Brandt, 71, registrar of the local Daughters of the American Revolution chapter. "I was walking down the street the other day and I saw an open parked car. Two of them were going to town in there."

Northampton isn't utopia for all lesbians, either. It's mostly a white community, with few minorities. "I'm waiting to go to Berkeley or New York," says one black Amherst College student who wears her hair in dreadlocks and is studying to be a percussionist in an Afrofunk band.

But most of Northampton's lesbian residents feel at home and accepted by their neighbors. "It is a good minority of the population, but it doesn't bother me," says Mark Brumberg, owner of *The Globe*, Northampton's main literary bookstore. "This is an open community." At the North Star, a restaurant and nightclub owned by lesbians, gays dance next to straight couples. "After living here for a couple of years," says Diane Morgan, "you begin to forget what it's like in the real world." But she's sure of one thing: the real world is nothing like Northampton.

BARBARA KANTROWITZ and DANAY SENNA in Northampton



BRIAN SMALE



JAMES R. GLOBUS

Avengers, a protest outfit formed to attract media attention to lesbian causes? And what about those men, who still dominate gay leadership positions? "When a lesbian walks into a room of gay men, it's the same as when she walks into a room of heterosexual men," says one activist. "You're listened to and then politely ignored." That, politically active lesbians agree, is one thing that must change. "We're not going to be invisible anymore," says Lesbian Avenger Ann Northrop. "We are going to be prominent and have power and be part of all decision making."

**YOUTHQUAKE:** Coming of age sexually is always a rocky rite of passage; for homosexuals, even more so. But young lesbians seem less and less conflicted about their identity. Girls who "are growing up lesbian today," says Carton, 35, of GLAAD, "watch 'Roseanne,' and they see a main character played by Sandra Bernhard, who's a lesbian, and it's accepted on the show. That's the difference between me growing up in the '60s and seeing 'The Children's Hour' with Shirley MacLaine. She finds out she's a lesbian and she kills herself." Growing up in a small, Southern town, Ashley Herrin (who appears on *Newsweek's* cover with her partner Catherine Angiel) turned to alcohol to deaden her feelings of sexual differentness. Today she's sober and is studying to become a therapist for homosexuals. Not all young lesbians believe they can tell their parents about their sexual orientation even now, but pioneers from the feminist trenches detect a refreshing new sense of self-acceptance. "When I was 21, I was terrified," says Dorothy Allison, lesbian author of the best-selling novel "Bastard Out of Carolina." "These young lesbians aren't scared in the same way. They're living their lives instead of explaining their lives."

On a few campuses around the



DOBOTHY LOW—STYMA

**Now playing in prime time:** *DeLaria* (far left), *lang, Bernhard* and *Fairchild* on 'Roseanne'



ABC

country, straights have found themselves on the defensive. "Once in a while you'll hear a first-year student slightly upset about being called a breeder or something," says Robin Russell, a recent graduate of Oberlin College in Ohio, considered to be a gay mecca by many young homosexuals. The annual Lesbutante Ball is a command performance for lesbian couples in their butch and femme finery. Earlier this year, at the University of Washington in Seattle, the student government sponsored its first Dyke Visibility Day. The catalogs of some 45 schools contain courses on the homosexual experience.

One common experience that doesn't appear in the course offerings is that of the "four-year lesbian." In today's politically correct atmosphere, say many students, it's become the in thing to experiment sexually. For some, that has meant lesbian relations. Feminist scholar Catharine Stimpson, dean of the graduate school at Rutgers University, says her students consider themselves to be a bisexual "Third Wave." "They're quite condescending about dividing humanity into heterosexual and homosexual," says Stimpson. The "LUG," or "lesbian until graduation" phenomenon, however, has alienated many people—not only straight alumni but lesbians, who suggest that it trivializes their long and difficult journey. "It's funny," says black lesbian author Jacqueline Woodson, 30. "When you go to college, you date all these baby dykes. Then you graduate, and you're still a lesbian, but they've gotten married and secure."

**POP CULTURE:** On March 10, an article about lesbian comedian Lea DeLaria appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, saying, "'The Tonight Show' is off-limits. 'Late Night' won't touch her." Arsenio Hall, DeLaria recalls, figured that if the other shows didn't want her, she was probably right for him. She passed her audition only to encounter resistance from Arsenio's lawyers. They didn't want her to use the word dyke, which, says DeLaria, "was basically my entire act. Arsenio himself walked in and said, 'If she wants to call herself a dyke, then it's not our business.'" So there she was, some three weeks later, in a man's suit, beaming out to America: "It's great to be here because it's the 1990s, and it's hip to be queer and I'm a big dyke."

The appearance of an openly gay comic on national television was a rare event, indeed. Though everybody knows the arts are full of gays and lesbians, the entertainment industry has done its best to keep them in the closet. In the course of working on her

## GLOSSARY

**FEMME** Traditionally, the "feminine" partner; young women are now redefining the role as less submissive

**BUTCH** Wears suit, motorcycle jacket or other "manly" gear

**LIPSTICK LESBIAN** Part of the Madonna aesthetic. Dolls up, has long nails, wears makeup and skirts.

**SEX-POSITIVE** Flaunts female-to-female eroticism, no-guilt, feel-good sex

**VANILLA** Likes kissing, holding hands, no rough stuff

forthcoming book on Hollywood, "But Wait a Second, We Haven't Finished Lunch," author Julia Phillips found that lesbians were particularly fearful about coming out. "It seems to me they're like where the guys were 30 years ago," says Phillips. "Hollywood is not really a brave kind of place anyway... and lesbians are right at the bottom of the list in terms of power structure."

The entertainment industry's treatment of gay and lesbian themes has been a mixed performance. TV has become somewhat more willing to project what lesbians consider to be a realistic image of their lives. Lesbians salute recent episodes of "Roseanne" and "Seinfeld," which portray them as normal people. The movies have a more troubling track record. Male fantasy, lesbians say, drove the sinister portrayal in "Basic Instinct." "I don't know any lesbian icepick killers," says Ellen Carton. "Do you?" The film "Fried Green Tomatoes" left the nature of the relationship between its two heroines ambiguous; the novella on which it was based left no doubt that they were lovers.

Some of Hollywood's reticence comes from an assumption that mainstream America isn't ready for gay and lesbian themes. But a number of lesbian authors have demonstrated their crossover appeal. Little, Brown has published hardcover editions of Sandra Scoppetone's mysteries, which include homosexual love scenes. Novelist Allison was even a little surprised by the success of her earlier, lesbian-oriented books among the public. "Eighty percent of the people at my readings are straight," she says. "It bothered me at first because I wasn't sure if I was being understood. But they read me the way I want to be read, which makes me hopeful."

**SEX AND SOCIETY:** Legend has it that Queen Victoria asked her ministers, "What do lesbians do?" Many straights still don't get it, but, says psychotherapist JoAnne Loulan, the Dr. Ruth of lesbian sex, "it is such a simple concept." For good or ill, lesbians have found it easy to "pass" because society accepts affectionate relations between women without assuming that they're sexual. Some straight men find the notion of two women together titillating. Others tend not to feel threatened by lesbians because "they can't imagine women having sex without [their] aid," says San Francisco psychology professor John De Cecco.



JAMES D. WILSON—NEWSWEEK



T. L. LITT—IMPACT VISUALS

**Challenging social conventions:** Petra Lijestraud, Alice Phillipson and their daughter; Washington march

some of the deepest resistance the two women encountered came from older homosexuals. "What we saw," she says, "was a real self-doubting, self-hatred. We don't get that anymore from people who know us and know our kids," now 4 years old and 20 months old.

Lesbians are well aware that their new prominence brings with

In fact, the desire to sleep with other women is perhaps the only common denominator in today's extraordinarily diverse lesbian culture. The pluralism is relatively new: in the '70s, the prevailing outlook was separatist and even prudish. Nine years ago, Debra Sundahl and Nan Kinney started *On Our Backs*, a lesbian magazine intended as a rebuke to feminist orthodoxy. "Women were denying themselves sexual pleasure because of politics," says Sundahl. "If it was male-identified, they decided not to do it." Now, says Carol Queen, an owner of a sexual paraphernalia store in San Francisco called *Good Vibrations*, "the lesbian community has a somewhat different take on sexual adventuring." There is a vital "sex-positive" scene, with nightly dancing at places like the Clit Club in New York and San Francisco's twice-a-month sex clubs.

Others don't have the energy to party—they're the "vanilla lesbians," home with their kids. There have always been lesbian parents, but in previous decades they tended to be women who discovered their sexuality some time after marriage and motherhood. Increasingly, there are lesbian couples who are becoming mothers together. Eileen Rakower, 33, and her partner each had a child by artificial insemination from the same unknown donor. "We have created a family this way, as out lesbians," says Rakower, a lawyer. Interestingly,

it the risk of backlash. Polls about gays suggest that Americans are most tolerant of sexual differences when they don't have to confront them. Many lesbians worry they'll become scapegoats for ultraconservatives—a fear exacerbated by North Carolina Sen. Jesse Helms's reported attacks on Achtenberg as a "damn lesbian." "The abortion issue has been lost. Now they're looking for a new target," says Dr. Dee Mosbacher, daughter of George Bush's secretary of commerce and a lesbian psychiatrist in San Francisco. "We fit the bill." Such concerns have long kept lesbians in the closet. But since the first salvo of the gay revolution in

1969, homosexuals have stressed the importance of coming out, and visibility remains the most pressing item on today's lesbian agenda. "More and more of us are starting to feel we have no choice," says Washington lobbyist Rosen, "and probably nothing to lose." At the very least, lesbians can claim some of the attention they say has so long, and so unfairly, eluded them.

ELOISE SALHOLZ with DANIEL GLICK in Washington, LUCILLE BEACHY and CARRY MONSERRATE in New York, PATRICIA KING in San Francisco, JEANNE GORDON in Los Angeles and TODD BARRITT in Chicago

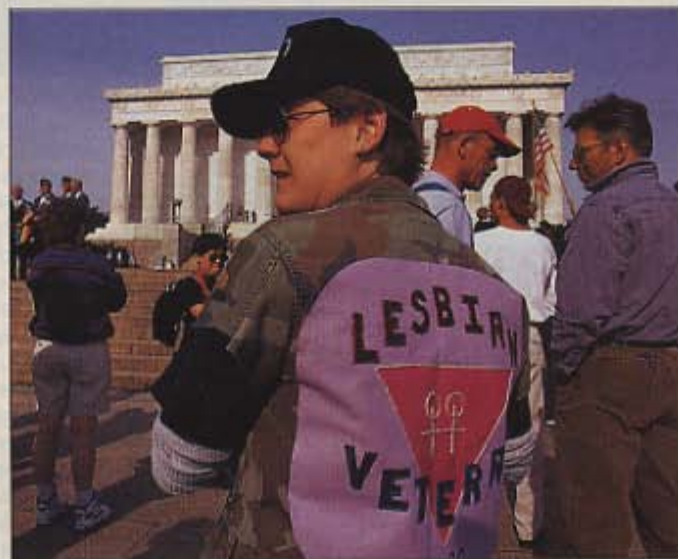
## A (Quiet) Uprising in the Ranks

Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower received some unsettling news while he was in occupied Germany after World War II. There were, he was told, a significant number of lesbians in his Women's Army Corps (WAC) command. He called in Sgt. Johnnie Phelps and ordered her to get a list of all the lesbians in the battalion. "We've got to get rid of them," he barked. Phelps said she'd check into it. But, she told the general, "when you get the list back, my name's going to be first." Eisenhower's secretary then interrupted. "Sir, if the general pleases, Sergeant Phelps will have to be second on the list, because mine will be first." Dumbfounded, Ike realized he'd lose many of his key personnel if he persisted. "Forget that order," he told Phelps.

Military brass have been far less tolerant since then, and women have borne the brunt of the crackdowns. No statistics exist to prove or disprove the widespread perception that there are a higher percentage of lesbians than gay men in the military. But servicewide, women are three times more likely to be investigated and discharged for homosexuality—six times more likely in the Marine Corps. Curiously, though, women have been largely left out of the debate over lifting the ban on homosexuals. "The big hysteria is about showers and bunks and fears of straight men," says Tanya Domi, a retired lesbian army captain now with the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. "There's been no discussion about how this impacts women."

Women's activists say that

the ban, and the pernicious "lesbian-baiting" that accompanies it, have cast a cloud over all women as they fight for respect in the military ranks. "If I act like a female, they think I'm weak and can't do my job," says "Sara," a noncommissioned army officer at Fort



MICHAEL HURDICH—PICTURE GROUP

From here to publicity: Speaking out at a Washington rally

Hood in Killeen, Texas, who has kept her lesbianism a secret. "If I'm overly aggressive, they think I'm manly and therefore must be a queer." Some gay and straight women alike say they have sometimes agreed to have sex with men rather than be hit with an accusation of lesbianism. Those who have reported sexual harassment by men often find their own sexual practices investigated instead. Military officials "are much more interested in investigating lesbians than they are in investigating sexual-harassment

cases," says Randy Shilts, author of "Conduct Unbecoming: Lesbians and Gays in the U.S. Military." Air force Lt. Heidi De Jesus was "outed" last August after she rejected a male colleague's persistent advances. Investigators at Goodfellow AFB in Texas put her off-base home under surveillance for 12 days and learned of her relationship with Airman

derstand how women feel all the time." In general, military women feel less threatened by homosexuality than men do. In a recent Los Angeles Times poll, 76 percent of army men but only 55 percent of army women opposed lifting the ban.

But some straight military women do say that they feel uneasy about the lesbians among them. Tricia Schwartz, whose active duty in the Persian Gulf with the Oregon National Guard, says one officer was open about her sexuality and made suggestive comments to women in her unit. "When she was in the shower, no one wanted to go there," says Schwartz. "I was more concerned about her looking at me than I was about getting my job done." But most military lesbians insist that they lead lonely, celibate lives out of fear of exposure.

As the July 15 deadline nears for President Clinton to decide whether and how to lift the ban, more lesbians are stepping forward publicly. Some have found themselves in legal limbo between military and civilian courts. Last week a navy administrative board said it was compelled under current military policy to recommend discharge for reserve Lt. Zoe Dunning, a Naval Academy graduate who announced her homosexuality at a rally in January. Dunning's attorneys argued that the hearing itself was improper, since one federal court has declared the military ban unconstitutional. Her case now goes up the chain of command for final action. But the brass may well decide to wait and see if Clinton holds fast for lesbians, just like Ike.

MELINDA BECK with DANIEL GLICK in Washington and PETER ANNIN in Houston