

STREET TRANSVESTITES ON THE AIR

BY JEO SKIR

New York, N.Y.— 5:15 Eastern Standard Time, Saturday July 17th. My phone operator called to give me a message he's been sitting on.

"Arthur Bell called to tell you there's a WBAI program on at 4:30 you'd like to hear."

"Why didn't you tell me before?" I asked him.

"I don't know," he replied honestly. He's not efficient but he's honest.

I called WBAI and they told me to come over, I could hear the tape. I zipped down, into a cab, and over to 359 E. 62nd Street and into the basement that WBAI has. It turned out the tape wouldn't be ready till 7 p.m. but Arthur Bell and his girlies were there.

They are a small group of transvestites more or less headed by Sylvia whom Arthur Bell had begun writing about a year ago in *Gay Power*. Arthur was holding that first article in his hand and facing his "girlies" who were seated in an anteroom outside a studio. Sylvia was there.

I was curious as to where the STAR (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries) were now living. When Arthur had last written of them, for the *Voice*, they were being faced with eviction from their 213 East 2nd Street building.

"We're still there," Sylvia explained, "But all packed and ready to move."

"Won't the Welfare Department help you?" I asked one of the girlies.

"I'm on Welfare," said the girlie, "I'm a transsexual. See, here is one of my breasts." (She here exhibited the sort of breast one sees on many fat Brooklyn teen-age boys.) "I can't get a job because I'm a transsexual . . ."

"Because of the oppression of our sexist society . . ." said Sylvia.

"Right on," said Arthur.

"I had no I.D." replied another girlie. "The only way I could get Welfare was to tell them I was an addict and I wasn't an addict. I was just sick. I'd had hepatitis and was sick and couldn't work but they wouldn't give me no Welfare on account I had no I.D. but when I was telling them I was an addict, they gave me Welfare right away and I had to take Methadone to keep on getting it and I took it though I wasn't an addict at all."

"I couldn't get Welfare because I didn't have proper identification," said Sylvia. "And they would want me to go to Bellevue and get a certificate that I'm mentally unbalanced and I won't because I don't think I'm mentally unbalanced just because I'm a homosexual."

"Where are you from?" one of the girlies asked.

"GAY." I said.

"How much did the house at East Second Street cost?" I asked.

"\$300 a month," said Sylvia. "There were five apartments."

"How many people were staying there?" I asked.

"Twenty." said Sylvia.

"That's \$15 a month each for rent," I said, "Couldn't you raise it?"

"Not in this oppressive society," said Sylvia. "And besides, there was no lights, no water, the toilets don't flush and we needed all our funds to support the street people that came to us for aid."

"I have to go now," said Arthur. "Sylvia, I think it would be a very good idea to go down to the next GAA meeting and ask them to help you. Make an announcement at the beginning of the meeting that you need help."

I went out with Arthur, and got something to eat and was back at the studio before 7 p.m. I'd found my memo pad missing from my back pocket after I left

the station. When I came in Sylvia was saying, "We're known as rip-off artists." Now I looked around for my memo pad and found it on a desk in the anteroom.

We went into one of the studios to listen to the tape. Sylvia and another semi-girlie (not a STAR resident) talked about the effects of hormones.

"Once your body gets used to it, your cock comes back and you can have regular sex," said Sylvia. "I'm going to keep my cock. I won't have a sex change. Last time I had sex I came on the inside."

Said Bebe: "I love my breasts. I love having them sucked. You have to have them sucked for them to develop right. Did you know that?"

They talked about getting hormones orally by taking birth control pills.

"How old are you, Sylvia?" I asked.

"Twenty. I first had sex when I was seven and I was into being Sylvia and out on the streets at eleven. I was named by a Lesbian Godfather and a gay Godmother. I think homosexuals are the Chosen People."

Now the tape is on and to me it seemed very sad. The life in the house on 2nd Street was sad. There were lots of animals, often untended. There was never any ease, always quarreling. There were unions broken by a partner being killed. "He was a junkie and had to support his habit and he went out to get some money and picked an off-duty policeman who shot him through the heart. So I went to the cemetery and planted a flower so that even if I couldn't come out he would always have flowers." The "girlies" had no realistic idea of how to get any sort of regular income. Some were determined to remain on Welfare "till she runs dry."

They described their life, the long whore-stroll, before you hit a number ("A whore-stroll is anywhere in the city a

whore walks."). There was no mention of terrible poverty, of pain, of humiliation. Prostitution was described as enjoyable. Sylvia: "You always have a good time when you're hustling."

Questioned by Arthur, they conceded they might be induced to take on a profession such as interior decorator but would always keep a little whoring on the side. Episodes of physical abuse, being beaten by the police, were passed over as more amusing than horrific. The Movement (both Gay Activist Alliance and the Gay Liberation Front) was put down. Sylvia claimed that in Gay Activist Alliance she was "put down for being Third World" and when she first came to a GAA meeting Richard Flynn, taking down her name, would not accept a girl's name from her.

Mike Morrissey, the Secretary of the group, felt that the Gay Activist Alliance had accepted society's structures and the STAR people, breaking from them, were among the freest he knew.

Arthur, winding up the tape, had led the group to discuss their revolutionary activity. It developed this consisted of stealing from their patrons.

The tape was over. I left with Sylvia. She was thin and worn. She had not been able to perform the many many tasks which make for beauty of the feminine sort.

"Do you think," I asked, "you could stop taking drugs and get a job?"

"I could never work at a job because I would have to pay taxes and support this society with the taxes," Sylvia explained. "About drugs, I got into them from working for the Movement. I was so exhausted with all my involvement in the Movement work I had to take speed."