

# REVIEWS

## Great Gay...

*Great Gay in the Morning! One Group's Approach to Communal Living and Sexual Politics.* By The 25 to 6 Baking and Trucking Society. Times Change Press, N.J., 1972. \$1.75 paper. 95 pp.

Reviewed by Andrew Kopkind

When I went to live in a farm commune in Vermont, I had no inkling that the move to collectivize my living arrangements would profoundly change the way I identified myself as an individual, a social actor, a man. It took me a long while to see that communalism *logically* — not coincidentally — entails radical alterations of consciousness: how people see, treat and trust themselves and others. Struggles over work, authority and sex roles don't "just happen" in communes; the struggle to redefine ourselves in those categories is the very meaning of the collective process, *is* that process. The breakthroughs and barriers on the way are what make the communal experience so exhilarating — and depressing. Living in an intense collective atmosphere is like an acid trip only longer, like a psychotherapy session only more real; like a marriage only bigger; like a dance only slower.

If all that sounds very abstract, it's because the material of communalism seems too personal — too big and too small — to compress into words. At least that's what I've always thought as I've read or browsed through the babbling stream of books and articles on communes that have not stopped since the advent of the new commune "movement" five or so years ago. Commune books almost always fall victim to one or another of two literary diseases: the bucolic plague or the germane measles — that is, either "we eat berries and drink spring water and we are all one and life is an eternal magical moment; or "the history of communes in America begins in 1723 when I, II and III, sub A, B, sub 1..." What I know to be true about the joyous and painful process of living in a communal setting was entirely missing in both the karmicopera and the double Ph.D.-thesis versions.

But it is all there in a thin volume called *Great Gay in the Morning: One Group's Approach to Communal Living and Sexual Politics*, written, put together and — obviously — lived by a commune called "The 25 to 6 Baking & Trucking Society." (The name came when, in the course of the inevitable conversation about the tyranny of time, someone stopped the clocks — and it was 25 minutes to 6 ever after.) The 5.35 people evolved from a heterogeneous collection of young freaks into a small group of gay men and lesbian women. Their sexuality certainly defines their particular commune, but their description of the process of "communizing" is applicable to any collection of people. Here's how one of the writers (perhaps "scribes" is a better designation) describes his first entrance into the commune, on a weekend visit: "I entered a house with twenty other freaks who were just living in the country having a good time. I had never been in a situation like that before. When I walked in the door, a woman came up to me and kissed me hello... Another woman was painting very quietly in the living room with a very slient gaze. There were people dancing and laying out nude in the meadow behind the house. There were about twenty cats and a dog and lots of getting high on grass and hash and tripping on psychedelics. It was like a fantasy with everyone from different backgrounds, knowing very little about each other, living together in a huge house. To a large degree, people related with each other on a superficial level; being freaks and getting high were common elements. There were also several other communes in town and in the area. We all socialized and intermingled — at times there were forty or more people partying and/or eating in our living room. In spite of the

fluctuating number of people living in the house during the summer, there was a definite feeling of people who lived there and people who were visiting. There was a real feeling of family."

The fantasies soon vanished, even though a lot of the fun remained. Nothing was ever neatly resolved: conflicts about "shit work" and how it gets done surfaced at the beginning and were still raging after four years and several generations of communards had come and gone. Deeper tensions over male/female and homosexual/heterosexual roles were played out in more traumatic — but no more conclusive ways: the gay people at the core of the commune finally had to live together and the straight people split.

There were "monogamous" couples within the commune, but there was an unspoken "incest taboo" against intra-communal sex — a common feature of many communes I've been in or known about. "I think one reason why so many of us here have been able to live together relatively peacefully is that our relations have not been genitally sexual," one of the 25-to-6 people wrote. "When the incest taboo goes, then the nuclear family will be finished and our new families will flourish. I've resited it because it seems like too much to handle. Living together and trying to love one another is hard enough (without) that sexual/possession/pain thing."

What makes the perceptions of the Bakers and Truckers (they love to cook, eat, dance and move around) so accurate and valuable is that they come from those insights which people in the process of liberation have, while those in oppressive or status-quo roles remain sightless. The women and gay men in the commune clearly saw the context of power relationships controlled by the straight men; how the straights used dope and hard rock music as an evasion or a bludgeon; how the heterosexuals "most insistently enunciated the doctrine of 'do your own thing' and 'it's all free' and 'don't tamper with the good vibes'...as a cover for privilege and power and laziness and irresponsibility."

That kind of thing goes on in all communes, rural and urban. And variations of that "doctrine" of "hippy ideology" invade every institution of the new culture. But the communards at 25-to-6 see better than most people how snared and deluded we are if we think that the freak culture, by itself, can support (or even encourage), non-oppressive styles of living and loving, working and learning.

(from *The Boston Phoenix*, Jan. 30, 1973)

[This book is available from the Gay Liberation Book Service, listing elsewhere in this issue]

## Lavender Country

I grew up in a hillbilly neighborhood (called "Gobbler's Knob") and as long as I could remember my father listened to WCKY, "The L.B. Wilson Station, On-the-Air-Everywhere-Twenty-four-hours-a-day." Then a top country music station, WCKY carried sentimental love, corn and humor mixed with a little old time religion. (They offered a "genuine" plastic tablecloth with the Lord's Last Supper embossed in "real" color.)

As I grew up, country music came to symbolize everything I didn't want to be. Men screwing women, fighting, religion, cock-fighting (i.e. roosters killing each other; my relatives still fight cocks in 1973), white lightning, hunting. The only thing I could identify with were such lyrics as "It wasn't God who made honky-tonk angels, as they say in the words of the song, many a married man has caused a poor girl to go wrong." For awhile I thought I was an angel-faggot as my lover took me from honky tonk to

honky tonk and every once in awhile to the Nashville Grand Old Opry. He drank whisky from the bottle straight, drove ninety miles an hour, chased women, loved country music, and I loved him intensely for three or four years. After several arrests, he's now settled down with a wife and family.

While country music contains the worst parts of male, lily-white heterosexual society, it also has potential as a music from the "people". Feelings laid out raw and real; simple love of simple things. All the good possibilities in the singing of Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Joan Ritchie, Woodie Guthrie or Pete Seeger. But all country singers, whether communist or reactionary, have been resolutely heterosexual. Bob Dylan, for instance, reached his sexist apogee when he recorded "Lay Lady Lay" in Nashville. And Tamy Wynette has tried to perfect a public image of the model wife — subservient, adoring and passive.

In the *Lavender Country* album, a hidden drama rests in the continuous struggle between the country music format and the gay liberation message. Country music has been resolutely silent on gayness. Listen to any country station, any singer or album and you would never know gay love existed. Gayness is as absent as Blackness. Yet travel anywhere in the South and you will find Black and Gay people. While Black people have for generations had a music, Gay people have been denied even that solace. We have had to get along with crumbs from heterosexuals: opera, blues (Billie Holiday) or show music (Judy Garland). We are now being offered "pervo" rock with Lou Reed or David Bowie, but this is more a celebration of decadence than of gay love. I can imagine a gay opera (Gertrude Stein-Virgil Thomson's *Four Saints in Three Acts* is a start) or gay blues or gay show tunes. But before *Lavender Country* I never dreamed there would be a gay country album. Now, here it is, and it's a success. *Lavender Country* triumphantly transforms country music into a gay playground.

The danger in such an enterprise is to be too campy and to become slick and inauthentic. Ed Sanders does this in his album *Truck Stop* where he uses music to shit on country people and make fun of them; he becomes one man putting down other men. Patrick Haggerty and his group from Seattle don't fall into this trap. They have a few questionable passages: before beginning the title song of the album, they have some chickens clucking and a farmer saying, "sure is hard to tell these days; used to be the chickens could tell..." This is corny and funny (in the best tradition of Minny Pearl and the Grand Old Opry) but it smacks of urbane slickness. There are also a few lines in the otherwise wonderful lyrics that stick out like "ingenuer," or "squire of Avalon." And in one place Patrick pronounces "leisure" in an urban way while country people would more likely rhyme it with "pleasure." But generally the lyrics are unbelievably good, combining at different moments just the right amount of irony, corniness, pathos and love. "Sashay out and give our way a try...make yourselves to home..." has just the right ring. Occasionally the lyrics become sheer poetry: in "Gypsy John" there is "ice running rings/ around the pond" or in "Georgie Pie" there is "Your walls of cellophane/ Would crinkle up and fry your brain/ If I whispered that I love you, Georgie Pie."

The music itself is superb with just the right tone for the words. For sheer lyrical supremacy Eve's rendition of "To a Woman" is about a comprehensive statement of gay liberation as we will have for awhile. With a violin, acoustical guitar and piano, the group avoids the butch thumping of cock-rock that we are so used to. The bass line hardly figures. If the bass line is the man fucking women line — the base of a *Guitar Army* marching band of male supremacy — then it isn't very gay. Anyway, *Lavender Country* has none of that.

The themes in the album take in about every topic imaginable in gay life (except Blackness and what it means to be Gay and Black). Cruising and fantasy appear,

particularly in "I can't shake the Stranger out of you," "Straight White Patterns," and "Gypsy John." "Waltzing Will Trilogy" and "Cryin these Cocksucking Tears" bring out our oppression: we are in hospitals ("They call it mental hygiene/ But I call it psychic rape!"), prisons, morgues. "Cryin' these Cocksucking Tears" lays down the gauntlet to straight white men: "...the battle's begun sir, I tell you I'm all done sir/ With crying these Cocksucking Tears." Sometimes there is contrapuntal irony as in "Back in the Closet Again" containing an analysis of the collapse of the New Left which is sung to Gene Autry's old theme song, "Back in the Saddle Again."

In *Lavender Country* Patrick Haggerty and his Seattle group do more than entertain. They mark out a whole new direction in gay liberation. That is to seize the culture, make it consciously ours, make it gay. And to use that culture to reach other gay people, make it an instrument of our liberation. Patrick has himself had long experience in the New Left, with the Seattle Liberation Front, with the Venceremos Brigade ("Out Out Damn Faggot"), and with gay liberation. Not everything we dreamed has come to pass and many have dropped out along the road when the way seemed long. Political rhetoric was hard to stomach at the hey day of the movement and has done nothing to help us in hard times. On the other hand, poetry, music, dance, pottery, gardening, singing, carpentry, nursing, cooking and similar concrete cultural actions have helped us to live liberated lives. Denied a culture, gay people have been creating one. This culture is not a "bourgeois superstructure" but has become the life of the movement while the ideologists have long ago become irrelevant superstars.

Culture and ideas, music and songs do come from our social practice. And the community of the *Lavender Country* people is an important part of the fabric of their work. The record was produced by gay people, is being distributed by them and they are reaping the "profits." ("We never seem to comprehend/ That love is not some dividend A plot to get more than we spend." — from "Straight White Patterns") While professional record companies are passing out money, dope, drugs and sex objects for their superstars, the Seattle *Lavender Country* group are going round the country in a dented gaily decorated Dodge distributing and publicizing the record. They go from gay group to gay group not from disc jockey to disc jockey. It'll be a long time before we'll hear any "Cocksucking Tears" over the FCC network. In fact, you probably won't be able to hear this record at all unless you write directly to Box 22228, Seattle, Washington 98122. The album costs \$4 plus 50 cents handling. Profits are recycled back into the gay community.

—Charley Shively

### ANIMALS

For Boswell

"When I consider how my light is spent..."  
—Milton

In Oceans-  
ful of sharks  
the shining bodies  
my past

I see you  
as a first fish  
something to eat  
to mull over

but you are more than that  
you are more than a flat touch  
a thing to steal  
Though I walked an old road  
My eyes were in my ears.

I hear you are riding your horse  
into the hills

of your father's farm  
& your arms are whips  
& your ass is without a saddle  
& it's been a hundred years  
since I counted your little sighs  
on my fingers  
one at a time.

—William Barber