

Manchester: queer folk-fest

By Sean McLennan

I had only ever heard of Manchester in passing, really. Of course, I knew of *Queer As Folk* (and was intimately acquainted with the soundtrack) but since it hadn't yet appeared on North American TV, I had no idea where it was set. It was thus on a whim that I decided to stop there, intrigued by a brief note in my guidebook stating that it was "Northern England's Gay Mecca."



It was the first warm evening of spring and a Friday to boot. I was walking through downtown heading for the village and it seemed all of Manchester had come out for a party. The streets were resounding with whoops and cheers and laughter. Two young men tried to toss a friend into a fountain. Hedonism reigned, and it was contagious. I quickened my pace.

Even if the rainbows hadn't made it clear I had finally reached the outskirts of the Village, the huge monument erected by the city to honour the contributions of the Manchester gay and lesbian community would have. I was impressed with the status that they had clearly earned. From a block away you could hear the dull roar of jubilant voices that drowned out the sound of traffic. I finally stepped into the full glory of Canal Street. Every fag, dyke, queen and queer in Manchester (and probably for miles in every direction) must have been out this night, because the crowd that thronged the cobblestones for blocks could have matched any sporting event. Traffic was, needless to say, blocked in either direction, and you could barely see the street's namesake canal for the people lining its embankment.

The age range, fashion, lights, colours—even the fetishes—were overwhelming. I've never seen such diversity outside of a Pride parade. People flowed in and out of the caf-bars that lined the street opposite the canal, free from the constraints of cover charges and strict liquor laws. There was nothing to do but step into the current and allow myself to be enveloped by feelings of sheer liberation and acceptance.

The weather and time of year probably combined to make my visit to Canal Street somewhat exceptional. But it is true that the community in Manchester enjoys an amazing degree of visibility and acceptance. The Village rivals the Old Compton Street area of Soho in London in size, services and quality—even without considering that the population of Manchester is under 500,000, compared to London's millions. Certainly, the impression one gets is that Manchester's community is more cohesive. Seeing Manchester now, it's hard to believe that as recently as 1967 it was still illegal for two men to have sex, even in private.

Manchester also boasts the largest gay and lesbian health and community services charity in the UK, the Lesbian and Gay Foundation, an umbrella organization that has now unified a number of already existing groups, including Healthy Gay Manchester (HGM). Most cities have some sort of organization that fulfills the function of education and health protection, but HGM is truly a model of excellence. They have pushed everything they do one step further.

Not only do they provide the standard STD and AIDS information, but also tips on everything from racism in the gay community to how to deal with hangovers and daily stress. There are guides on how to deal with homophobia, and HGM runs street defense sessions throughout the year. They provide a two-part guide to safer cruising, describing everything from your legal rights to a step-by-step description of what to do in case of an arrest. And all this information is provided in casual colloquial English, making it less

intimidating and more accessible.

Free condoms are reasonably easy to find in most cities. In Manchester, however, HGM makes freely available the Gay Man's Safer Sex Pack, an easily pocketed sachet with two condoms and a packet of lube (recognizing that a leading cause of condom breakage is a lack of adequate lubrication).

And perhaps most telling of Manchester's homo-friendly attitudes: no more furtive searching online or in GLBT guidebooks for local starting points to get acquainted with the area. You can find HGM's *Lesbian and Gay Guide to Greater Manchester* at the all the tourist information centres. Manchester's a good place to be gay!

Not found in North America, one of the most delightful venues that Britain has to offer is the caf-bar. Appropriately hyphenated, these establishments live double lives, providing the same street with very different atmospheres. By day, Canal Street is a classic picture of European leisure, lined with open-fronted street cafs and diners lingering over coffee and late lunch. At night, however, the tables and chairs disappear and the cafs morph.



Space is cleared for dance floors, the music volume goes up and the spirits start to flow. With no cover charge, it's easy to explore up and down the street, checking out the unique character of each location. Since many are open twenty-four hours, the pleasure never really stops.

The Village has more than its share of more familiar clubs, too, and truly enough variety to satisfy anyone. Be prepared for a huge variation in cover charge, everything from around \$2CDN to

Continued on page 29



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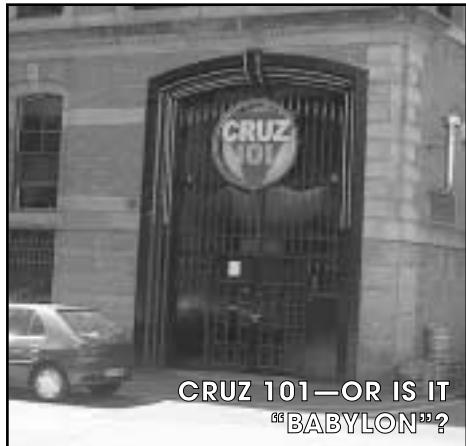
"If this Bill passes, the institution of marriage will be the next casualty of gay and lesbian lobby groups and weak-kneed politicians. In the 1950s, buggery was a criminal offence, now it's a requirement to receive benefits from the federal government."

-Garry Breitkreuz, MP (Canadian Alliance, Yellowhead)

Source: EGALE

Continued from page 28

\$15CDN. Many also require membership, although sometimes if you mention you're from out of town, they'll waive the membership fee. Application at the door is easy and varies in complexity—one place even required applicants to sign an affidavit confirming their homosexuality!



CRUZ 101 is the largest gay dance club and possibly the model for *Queer As Folk's* "Babylon." It boasts two floors and five bars and more boys than anyone can handle. Guaranteed to be packed later on in the night, if you love the sensory overload of hundreds of bodies gyrating to music that fills your head and bass that massages your innards, this is *the* place to be. Black seems to be the uniform of choice.

Lesbi-girls will likely want to check

out Climax, reportedly the "best women-only night club in the UK," if they make it to Manchester (sorry, I can only provide a second-hand review—they wouldn't let me in!).

For something entirely different, I'd recommend the Hollywood Showbar, a slightly more intimate club with occasional live drag entertainment and a silver-sequined, drop-dead gorgeous DJ-Queen spinning everything from Dolly Parton to Britney Spears.

From piano bars and casual pubs to industrial and rave clubs, it's all there within walking distance. Make your first stop the tourist bureau, to pick up the aforementioned HGM guide for a comprehensive listing and maps. If you time your trip right, you could also take in one of the seasonal events: the Manchester Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, or the biannual Gay and Lesbian International Arts Festival staged by Queer Up North (another Manchester organization).

You've likely heard of the ungodly cost of accommodation in the UK and, well, I can't say much to ease your fears beyond, "at least it's not London!" Fortunately, Britain has an excellent system of youth hostels that are open to any age, and they offer everything from single to ten-person rooms. The YHA hostel in Manchester (right on the edge of downtown, about twenty minutes from the Village on foot) is touted as one of the best in the world and rings in at about \$30-\$40CDN a night. There are a couple of

smaller, slightly less expensive hostels not quite as conveniently located and the University of Manchester lets cheaper residence rooms when school's out. A mid-range hotel or B&B runs about \$100-\$120CDN a night.

Should (for some unimaginable reason!) you get bored with the Village, the rest of Manchester is also worth checking out. It has recently been undergoing a renaissance of sorts, as funds have been poured into downtown renewal. Deansgate offers an international selection of restaurants and designer shops; the "Curry Mile" in Rusholme serves up the finest of Indian cuisine and culture; and the obligatory Chinatown provides an authentic taste of the Orient. For the best in day-time leisure, you won't want to miss Castlefield and its award-winning architecture, canal walks and local festivals.

Expanding outward, Manchester is but a stone's throw from Liverpool, home of the Beatles, and makes a perfect stopping point on the way from London to Scotland.

Whatever your tastes or plans, if you're gay or lesbian, missing Manchester would be like going to London and missing Big Ben. It's a must on any British travel itinerary.

Images in this story courtesy of the *Queer As Folk* website (www.queerasfolk.org.uk)

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