

## **Comparison between the film *Stonewall* and the historical record**

Out of the Closet: LGBTQ Portrayals in Movies After the Stonewall Riots (1969)  
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The Mattachine Society was actually very important and somewhat effective before the Stonewall Riots. In the middle 1960's, they had shamed the New York City police into stopping the aggressive entrapment that they were practicing up until that time. The New York City police still did harass gay people, however, and the separate Transit Police still practiced active entrapment.

The Mafia invested \$3,500 in 1969 dollars (\$22,750 in today's dollars) opening The Stonewall Inn. They made that back within 5 hours of opening on the first night.

The Stonewall Inn could take in \$4,000 to \$6,000 (\$26,000 to \$39,000 in today's dollars) on a weekend night.

The Mafia paid off the local precinct police \$1,200 (\$7,800 in today's dollars) a week.

The Mafia manager of The Stonewall Inn was called "Fat Tony". He did live with one of the transvestite patrons for a short time. However he did not commit suicide. He "disappeared" in the early '70's. No one has found out what happened to him, but he was known to talk too much about Mafia affairs.

Fat Tony's boss was Ed "The Skull" Murphy. He is not portrayed with a fictional character in the movie, but it is obvious that there was a boss above the movie's "Vinny" character. Ed "The Skull" Murphy would regularly hang out at all the Mafia owned gay bars he controlled just lurking in the background. He was scoping out wealthy patrons for blackmail. He, and therefore the Mafia, had a nationwide blackmail business that grossed far more than the bars. The Mafia was particularly interested in Wall Street employees, which they blackmailed for insider information about stocks and bonds. Ed Murphy was known to have a photograph of himself with J. Edgar Hoover. He, or the Mafia, probably had gay blackmail evidence on J. Edgar Hoover, and that is probably the reason that J. Edgar Hoover denied the existence of the Mafia and never went after them. Ed "The Skull" Murphy was also attracted to teen-age boys, and that is probably the reason that so many under-aged street kids were admitted to the Stonewall Inn.

His control of gay bars extended well into the 1970's, although right after the Stonewall Riots legitimate, non-Mafia, bars started opening and gave the Mafia controlled bars competition. He also became an F.B.I. informant, and was never seriously charged with a crime or restricted in his criminal activities. In 1972 he got control of the Christopher Street Festival Committee, which organized the Gay Pride March every June, and succeed in reversing the direction of the march so it went from Central Park to Greenwich Village, greatly increasing the business on that day in his bars. In 1978 he "came out" and became a gay rights activist. He died of AIDS in 1989.

The scenes of characters openly walking down the street in full drag are

inaccurate. You could get arrested on the spot for dressing in full drag in public at the time. The law was “three pieces of gender appropriate clothing”, as mentioned when the police were raiding Stonewall early in the movie. Much more common than full drag were “scare queens”, something that is rarer now. “Scare queens” would dress as men, but were highly effeminate in dress and demeanor. The character of “Emory” in *The Boys in the Band* was a scare queen, as was one of the characters in *Stonewall* shown screeching during the riots. The term “scare queen” was used mainly in New York and the east coast, mainly during that time period. Most drag queens would have walked to the Stonewall Inn in some form of male dress and changed into full drag inside the bar.

The Stonewall Inn was generally considered a dive bar by the Greenwich Village gay community, and was frequented by the most marginalized of the gay community -- drag queens, homeless street kids, and drug dealers. Julius's was the typical gay bar of that period – staid, middle class, with no dancing. However, The Stonewall Inn became tremendously popular because it had two dance areas and did not enforce any “rules” about dancing. You could dance and “party” in the modern sense. It was the first such gay dance bar in New York, and probably the only one in the U.S. at the time, except maybe for L.A. and San Francisco. It attracted a wide diversity of clientele as it became more popular. It was loved for its freedom and hated for its Mafia control.

The Stonewall Inn had no running water behind the bar, only in the rest rooms. The shot of washing the glasses in a tub of dirty water is accurate. This was against health regulations. Often a used glass would

just be dipped in the tub and then filled with a drink for the next customer.

There was only one exit – the front door. It was a completely illegal fire trap. If brought up to code with a fire exit, it still would probably only have been authorized to hold about 60 people. It often had over 200 people inside.

The liquor served was either bootleg or Mafia produced. It was not commercially made. Even then, it was watered down and overpriced.

The cover charge, however, was \$1 (\$6.50 in today's dollars) on a weeknight and \$3 (\$22.50) on a weekend – low enough by New York City standards of the time that the street kids and drag queens could get in.

The Stonewall employees, which means they were Mafia employees also, were disdainful of the patrons of the bar, as shown in the movie.

The Stonewall Inn was raided on the Tuesday night before the riots. It was a “normal” raid by the local precinct cops. That meant that the Mafia knew the raid was coming, it was conducted early in the evening before business really got going, and was fast enough that the bar could recover and still earn as much as normal that night.

The policeman that led the raid on Friday, the night of the riots, was Seymour Pine. He worked at the time in the New York City Police Department's First Division of Public Morals. He was not a local precinct cop. He did the raid with only 6 police officers – two undercover women that went into the bar before the raid to gather evidence, himself and a plain clothed assistant, and two uniformed officers. They expected no problems.

Seymour Pine's intention during the raid on that night was more than just making a few arrests. He fully intended to close the bar permanently. His plans included confiscating all of the liquor, records, juke boxes (which was the sound system), and then cutting the two bars into pieces and removing them for "evidence". He later claimed that he was doing that to protect the gay community from the Mafia and their locally controlled corrupt police. More likely, it was because there was a mayoral election due in the fall, or, even more likely, the Police Department had received pressure from influential Wall Street executives because of the blackmail going on.

Generally, The Stonewall Inn was not popular with Lesbians, but some were there on the night of the raid. There are reports that they were gratuitously "frisked" during the raid before the riots started. One of them was probably important in the start of the riots.

The process of going from a run-of-the-mill "raid" to a riot was much more extended than shown in the movie. Someone in the crowd outside did yell out "Gay Power" early during the arrest phase, but there was just giggling in response. Also, one of the drag queens did hit a cop with her bag while being put into the paddy wagon, but that did not elicit an immediate riot as shown in the movie, it just escalated the anger.

The most important catalyst for the riots was probably either a Lesbian or a FTM (female to male) transgendered person, whose identity is still unknown, who fought the police fiercely while handcuffed during the arrest. The police tried twice to push her into the back of a squad car, and she kicked and punched her way back out. They succeeded the

third time and the squad car left. However the anger of the crowd escalated seriously because of that.

The paddy wagon made one run to the local police precinct before the riot started and came back for another load.

The crowd outside started by throwing coins at the police. That escalated to throwing cans and bottles, trash, and anything lying around loose. Then a stash of bricks was found at a nearby construction site, and the crowd threw some of them. The police were attacked directly to try to stop the arrests and free the people in the paddy wagon. The six police officers then quickly retreated inside the bar. All the people inside the paddy wagon escaped. A parking meter was pried loose, as shown in the movie, and used as a battering ram. A trash can was also thrown through the front window as shown in the movie.

After the riot started, the Seymour Pine and the five other police officers were barricaded in the bar with a reporter and a number of patrons and bar employees for a long time, about 20 or 30 minutes. Their calls for back up were mysteriously countermanded – probably by the local precinct police that were receiving payoffs. They did not receive back up until one of the women undercover cops squeezed through a vent in the roof and escaped out the back, going to the local fire station to call for support. The Fire Department arrived first.

Author David Carter credits Seymour Pine with preventing a blood bath inside the bar, which probably would have changed history. The rioters were very close to flooding into the bar, and the six cops were in a defensive position with guns drawn when back-up arrived. Seymour

Pine's calm and experienced leadership kept control of the situation within the bar throughout.

The riot police that marched in phalanx with clubs and shields was known then as the Tactical Patrol Force or TPF. They were particularly brutal during the riots, gratuitously bashing people, some of which were merely observers and bystanders. A local heterosexual couple that just happened to be walking down Christopher Street was beaten.

The kick line in front of the TPF was used repeatedly during the night. The song they sang was exactly the song shown in the movie.

The riots lasted for hours that night. The fiercest fighters, by far, were the drag queens and the street kids. The street kids taunted the TPF until they would march toward them, and then run around the back streets and taunt them from behind. The TPF was particularly ineffective that night and did not shut off a controllable perimeter around the riot area and control the streets within.

The street kids were mainly effeminate middle class white kids, disowned or disaffected from their families.

Judy Garland's death probably was not a cause of the riots. Judy Garland was associated with older middle class gay men, not the drag queens or the street youth that actually rioted.

The three biggest "revelations" that was felt both by the cops and the general community was that

1. The police could be overwhelmed and humiliated.
2. Drag Queens, supposedly weak and silly, could fight.

3. The police (or at least some of them) actually were impressed by the gays that fought back, and appreciated the camp humor used by them.

The riots were on a Friday Night. They started again on Saturday night, with more vehemence and violence on both sides. The police learned from their mistakes on Friday and did a better job of crowd control Saturday night. However the gay anger was also greater. The riots continued on Sunday but were much smaller. Monday and Tuesday were quiet, but Wednesday night had a short, but very intense, outbreak of violence.

The effect of the riots was almost immediate. One of the fanciest straight dance clubs invited gay patrons for a special Sunday night straight-gay mixer the next weekend. It was not very successful, however, and was not repeated.

Mayor Lindsey quickly stopped the police harassment of gay bars, allowing legitimate, non-Mafia gay establishments to start opening.

The Gay Liberation Front formed within a few weeks of the riots. It was very active, but disorganized and militantly Marxist, and only lasted until October. A group of activists broke off from the Gay Liberation Front to form a more focused group that fall, The Gay Activist Alliance. It became a very successful and effective gay rights group in the early 1970's.

The homophile Mattachine Society tried to lead the reaction to the riots, but they were viewed as stodgy and ineffective by the young people most involved in activism at the time, and they gradually

became insignificant in the gay rights struggle. Stonewall was very much a generational change, as shown in the movie.

However, one of the older generation was extremely important. Craig Rodwell, a “homophile” activist and founder of the very important “Oscar Wilde Book Store” in 1967, led the effort to commemorate the riots with an annual pride march and festival on the last weekend of June. His efforts were highly successful and directly led to the pride marches now held all over the world. He convinced the Mattachine Society to change their July 4<sup>th</sup> “Remembrance March” in Philadelphia, shown in the movie, to New York City at the end of June. Thus, the Mattachine Society became a supporter of the new march, and the “Remembrance marches” from 1965 to 1969 became the direct predecessors of the current New York City Pride March held to this day. New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago all held pride marches one year after the riots, in June 1970. Chicago’s first Pride Parade had about 150 to 200 marchers. New York City’s march started with about the same number of marchers, but grew to a few thousand by the time they reached Central Park. The first gay student group at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign organized very soon after.

Stonewall was just a spark that ignited a tinderbox of repressed feelings and anger in the gay communities of the time. In that respect it was similar to the storming of the Bastille starting the French Revolution. There had been similar riots before, most notably the Black Cat Riots in Los Angeles on New Year’s Eve, December 31, 1966. That night the L.A. police raided the Black Cat Tavern with very similar results to Stonewall two and half years later. Those riots led to the founding of The Advocate magazine, which is still publishing, and the organization of the Metropolitan Community Church as the first gay-affirming

denomination. However the Black Cat Riots did not lead to the startling change in attitude and organization among gay people that happened after the Stonewall Riots. That change, much more than the actual event itself, is the lasting world-wide legacy of Stonewall.