

# The next wave

The acceptance of nightlife's drag scene by the mainstream started America's gender revolution. And San Francisco's transsexuals are out to finish it.

**By Steve Greenberg**

## if you ask

the casual observer what the Motherlode in San Francisco is, "a drag bar" is generally the answer you'll get. If you ask Motherlode patron Rachel Lane, you'll get quite a different take. "I won't go so far as to say it's a temple," she states, "but it is a holy place of gender-differentiation. The morality of the place isn't significant. What is significant is that everybody—lesbians, gays, queers, dykes, cross-dressers, sadomasoch-

ists, straights, bisexuals, transsexuals—all go there. You can't find every variety of human being in a gay bar, but you will at the Motherlode. Wherever transsexuals are, that phenomenon exists."

This unofficial headquarters of a gender revolution sits just outside the low-rent, high-crime neighborhood known as the Tenderloin, a district that is home to an estimated 2,000 transgendered women. While transgendered women exist everywhere, the Tenderloin is to the transgendered what the Castro is to gay men.

The local press refers to the Motherlode as a drag bar, an oversimplified inaccuracy that reflects a widely held misperception of the transgendered community at large. While there certainly are occasional cross-dressers at the bar, the majority of the patrons are much more evolved in their gender expressions. Hormones, breast implants, cosmetic surgery, and in some cases sexual reassignment surgery make dedication to being female more than a dress-

up game for these women.

"I don't think most people, gay or straight, know the difference between a transvestite and a transsexual," says Veronica Klaus, a cabaret singer. "In the gay community, even if they do, they don't necessarily want to claim it. Politically, I think gays feel that including us somehow dilutes their focus."

It's that sort of sentiment that works Anne Ogborn's last nerve. As a member of Transgender Nation, a Queer Nation spin-off founded in October 1992, Ogborn went to the march on Washington this year to protest the exclusion of *transgender* from the march's title. Ogborn feels disowned, saying, "We were at one

not," says Ogborn.

While the transgendered community is populated by nurses, professors, computer programmers, fashion models, therapists, artists, and musicians, a high percentage of transgendered women, primarily in the preoperative phase, have at one time or another engaged in sex work, members of the community say. "For many of these women, prostitution is simply the only economic option," says Christine Tayleur, a counselor at the Tenderloin Self-help Center. "Many of these women are thrown out of their homes early in life and miss getting an education. They have no support from their families or from society. There are very few options." Tayleur tells of several success stories despite the odds, including two former prostitutes and drug users, one of whom is now an honors nursing student and the other a computer programmer.

For some transgendered women, sex work may fulfill other needs besides economic ones. Lane, a theater artist and film producer, says that while sex work "is of course mostly economic, it's also part

of the discovery process that a transgendered woman may go through. Some of it is acting out fantasies, obsessions, or compulsions. It's a sort of coming-of-age, a part of the transition, an identifying and validation process."

Lane believes a large part of the allure of preoperative transsexuals, often referred to in street slang as "queens," is theatricality. "There's a tremendous sense of mystery and ambiguity in the whole 'chick with a dick' scene," she says. "The bar scene is hyperfeminine and hypersexual, much more so than in either straight or gay bars. I think this has a huge appeal for many men—and for some women as well." Indeed, Lane has noticed a growing number of lesbians coming into the bar.

Not all lesbians, though, are turned-on by the scene. Ogborn, who identifies as bisexual, blames

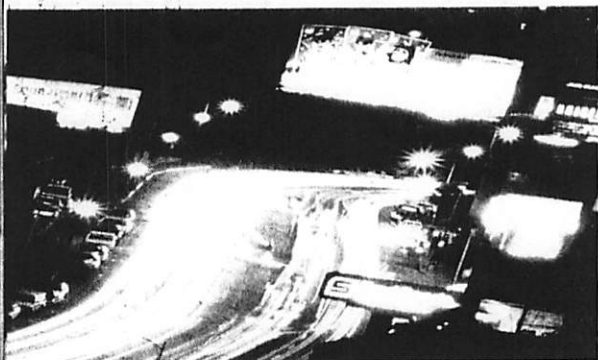
# "The bar scene is hyperfeminine and hypersexual."

the lesbian feminist community for "genocidal attitudes toward transgendered women." The exclusion of a transgendered woman from the 1991 Michigan Womyn's Music Festival is still a major sore spot.

Victoria Schneider, a former marine and stage designer who also identifies as bisexual, feels that the lesbian community views her as a threat. "They won't accept me, and that really hurts because I do like women a lot," she says. Tayleur, who identifies as lesbian, has had generally positive interactions with nontranssexual lesbians but adds with a laugh that "some women feel I'm some kind of spy from the patriarchy."

The transgendered community faces battles on three fronts: Not only must it demand recognition from both the gay and straight worlds, but it must also overcome forces that are weakening its own ranks. In her work Tayleur sees an underside to her culture that many on the outside don't. If anyone knows all there is to know about the crying game, it's Tayleur. "There's a very large homeless population within this community," she states. "There are countless medical abuses of this community. There is constant police harassment. Housing is a big issue; many landlords will simply refuse to rent to a transgendered woman, assuming automatically that she's a prostitute or a drug addict."

Regarding the drug problem in



## America after dark

time very much a part of the gay community. Then the radical feminists, the PC lesbians, and the assimilationist gay men threw us out of our own movement."

Bambi Lake, an entertainer who has been a part of the transgendered community for 20 years, explains, "We're at the same level gay culture was in the 1950s." Ogborn tells of daily abuses by the police, including numerous cases of sexual abuse of transgendered sex workers. In a survey conducted this year by Transgender Nation and the Coalition on Prostitution, a sex workers advocacy group, 25% of transgendered sex workers responded that they had been raped by the police. Harassment by the police is part of everyday life for transgendered women. "Every transgendered woman, in my experience, is assumed by the police to be a sex worker, whether she is or