

# The First Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras

As a nation, Australia was born on the shores of Gallipoli during the First World War. While we may have officially received the title in 1901, it was the courage of our troops, and the qualities of mate-ship, bravery and comradery that led to the development of the national character that makes us as a nation internationally recognisable. Throughout Australian history new conflicts have led our nation in new directions. Indeed, it can be argued, that much of Australia's national character has been born through conflict, as smaller groups and individuals challenged the establishment for their right to autonomy, justice and free speech. With this in mind, I would contend that the first ever Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, held in Sydney on the 24<sup>th</sup> June 1978 stands as a significant turning point in our culture. The implications for the Gay, Lesbian, Bi-Sexual and Transgender (GLBT) community have been enormous in terms of acceptance, individual and community rights, and personal freedoms. I would further argue that this first Mardi Gras, and all the ones that would follow, have changed the face of Australia, to ourselves and to the outside world.

The Mardi Gras was Sydney's contribution to the international Gay Solidarity Celebrations<sup>1</sup>, an event that had grown up as a result of the Stonewall riots in New York, where the persecution of sexual minorities by the establishment had led to public disobedience and eventual rioting. The GLBT community had begun to "push back" after years of oppression and discrimination. In the years between the Stonewall Riots and Australia's first Mardi Gras there was a growing dissatisfaction with the way the GLBT community was treated in many parts of the western world. A growing sense of global unity was linking the GLBT community as it struggled to find its place in a changing world. The Mardi Gras was one of a series of events by the Gay Solidarity Group to promote the forthcoming National Homosexual Conference, and offer support to San Francisco's Gay Freedom Day and its campaign against California State Senator John Brigg's attempts to stop gay rights supporters teaching in schools<sup>2</sup>.

Prior to the first Mardi Gras in 1978, the NSW police had many rights surrounding arbitrary arrest of citizens<sup>3</sup>. Protestors in the Sydney Mardi Gras had requested the right to parade peacefully down Oxford St and into Hyde Park, and this request had been granted, however on their way down Oxford St the paraders were accosted by

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<sup>1</sup> [www.mardigras.org](http://www.mardigras.org)

<sup>2</sup> [www.mardigras.org](http://www.mardigras.org)

<sup>3</sup> [www.news.com.au](http://www.news.com.au)

police telling them to disband. The encounter became violent when police began to arrest men for wearing female attire, which was at the time illegal. Many fought against police to prevent their fellow marchers being thrown into police vehicles, and what started as a peaceful protest became a raging riot. 53 people were arrested and gaoled that night including the driver of the only float, who was pulled from it and then taken to the police station where he was assaulted by two officers.<sup>4</sup> In the months following many more marches and protests were held, this time against the brutal behaviour of the police. In April, 1979, the NSW parliament repealed the NSW Summary Offence Act, which had permitted the police to make the arrests, and formed a new piece of legislation called the Public Assemblies Act.<sup>5</sup> This effectively allowed participants to hold marches without a permit so long as the police had been notified in advance. It was this first Mardi Gras that so greatly changed the power of the police in the NSW area, the consequences of that one march went a long way in remedying the corrupt and brutal nature of the then police force.

Before 1984 male homosexuality was illegal and punishable by law.<sup>6</sup> Sexual minorities were forced to keep their sexuality hidden from the outside world. Post 1984 things were quite different, but in the time of the first Mardi Gras many of the protestors chose to hide their identities from the general public. The 53 people arrested that night did not have the same luxury and their names were printed in newspapers across Sydney. Many lost jobs, were forced out of their houses, and were shunned by their neighbours as a result of their forced “outing”.<sup>7</sup> As a society, we have seen many important changes in the rights and status of The GLBT community. With the repeal of laws that categorised homosexuality and much of the GLBT community as “deviant”, much of the stigma associated with homosexuals no longer applied. It became illegal to discriminate against a person because of their sexual preferences.<sup>8</sup> We now have openly gay politicians, athletes and pop-culture icons. While the GLBT community still faces obstacles in Australia, much of the progress made can be attributed to the first Mardi Gras and the momentum it began.

Political policies that were active in Australia before the Mardi Gras in Sydney reflect a homophobic society led by the religious belief that homosexuality was a sin and a disease. These religious groups do not support the gay and lesbian movement, and they have been the Mardi Gras main opposition for the past 32 years.<sup>9</sup> . As the political power of the religious right has waned, many government policies surrounding homosexual freedoms and rights have been changed. Sodomy laws were part of Australian law from 1788 through to 1994 under *Human Rights (Sexual Conduct) Act 1994*. The punishment

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<sup>4</sup> [www.news.com.au](http://www.news.com.au)

<sup>5</sup> [www.mardigras.org](http://www.mardigras.org)

<sup>6</sup> [www.dictionaryofsydney.org](http://www.dictionaryofsydney.org)

<sup>7</sup> [www.dictionaryofsydney.org](http://www.dictionaryofsydney.org)

<sup>8</sup> *A history of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras*

<sup>9</sup> Fuse magazine

for "buggery" (sodomy) was reduced from execution to life in prison in 1899.<sup>10</sup> It is not just the policies that have been affected by this historic event, but the politicians too. We now have openly gay politicians who have just as much power as their heterosexual counterparts. The first Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras lobbied for equality, and it has become a tradition from then that the floats paraded at the Mardi Gras have references to the main political issues for gay people at that time.<sup>11</sup> For the past few years same sex marriage has been heavily featured throughout the celebration in the hope that, like equality, it will one day be achieved. When if and when same-sex marriage becomes law, how great a role will the Mardi Gras have played in raising awareness and provoking discussion?

With the laws of the time not permitting acts of homosexuality and the society of the time shaming admittance of homosexuality, it was difficult for gay people to fight to be recognised. The first big change for the homosexual community came after their first march in the Mardi Gras where NSW polices' powers were lessened, and this first outcome inspired the gay population of Sydney to begin the struggle that has been obtaining equal rights. From then everything has snowballed and the GLBT- gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual- alliance has become an ever growing body, fighting for the rights of the GLBT community. Every year the Mardi Gras grows, demonstrating the ever growing support that our nation now has for all elements of our society. This accepting and celebratory outlook has been much influenced by the gay community, and their influence was inspired by that first Mardi Gras.

Much like the Opera House and the Harbour Bridge, Sydney's' Mardi Gras has become a tourist attraction, drawing people from across the globe to take part in this celebratory event of acceptance and unity. Since its birth the Mardi Gras has been not only about the rights of the gay community but also about encouraging homosexual people to be proud of who they are. Today, the Mardi Gras encourages others to celebrate along with the gay community and this open and welcoming attitude is what has inspired people of all races and religions to participate in the parade down Oxford St. The Mardi Gras has taken on a festive feel, its crowds swelled with families, revellers and well-wishers. Famous actors, politicians and athletes have all taken part in the parade, some serving as Grand Marshal for the event.<sup>12</sup> It is an accepted part of Sydney's cultural calendar, drawing more than 30million dollars into the New South Wales economy each year.<sup>13</sup> It is Australia's second largest tourist event and the largest festival of its kind in the world.

Australia's cultural identity and heritage has been changed forever by the first Mardi Gras. We are a radically different society, politically and socially, from what we might have been if those first brave individuals had not taken to the streets of Sydney in June of 1978. And the Mardi Gras continues to bring change, challenging our perceptions,

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<sup>10</sup> [www.murdoch.edu.au](http://www.murdoch.edu.au)

<sup>11</sup> [www.dictionaryofsydney.org](http://www.dictionaryofsydney.org)

<sup>12</sup> Fuse Magazine

<sup>13</sup> [www.mardigras.org](http://www.mardigras.org)

with its joyful, and frequently confronting refusal to be ignored. It is a celebration of us and our journey. It stands as a turning point for us as a society and has certainly changed the course of Australian history.

## Bibliography

### **Books:**

Carbery ,G 1995, *A history of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras*, Australian lesbian and gay Archives, Victoria

This text was factual and direct. It is a secondary source written to provide information on events and this made it useful. The writing is for a competent reading levels, however it does not require an extensive vocabulary.

### **Magazine:**

Copland, S, *The Political History of the Mardi Gras*, Fuse Magazine, p 10-11

This secondary source shows strong biases and a lack of specific information. Its value is purely based on the representation of emotions and this is not enough to recommend it as a valuable source. As it was written for a magazine it was written for a specific purpose and this one's was to provoke feelings, not to inform.

### **Websites:**

*Homosexuality Legislation Twentieth Anniversary*, 31 August 2004, viewed 19 July 2011, <http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/PARLMENT/hansart.nsf/V3Key/LC20040831083>

Although this secondary text was factually accurate, it has been written in a way that shows obvious bias. The information glosses over many undesirable details and focuses on the eventual solution being agreeable. It was helpful only in that it provided facts; it did not contain any clear insight or opinion and was ultimately unhelpful.

Wotherspoon, G 2008, *Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras*, viewed 18 July 2011, [http://www.dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/gay\\_and\\_lesbian\\_mardi\\_gras](http://www.dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/gay_and_lesbian_mardi_gras)

This secondary source provided a comprehensive, insightful, detached, and hence unbiased, account of events. The information was easily read and useful because it was chronological and unemotional leaving just the raw facts to be gained. It was very useful in understanding events and the actions of people involved.

Leo, A and Temple, W 27 February 2008, *Is it time to say sorry?*, viewed 18 July 2011, <http://www.news.com.au/features/is-it-time-to-say-sorry/story-e6frfler-1111115658679>

A dictation of an interview, the primary source showed heavy biases, however no accounts appear to have been embellished. This text was highly emotional and as a result this text cannot be relied upon for facts. It was however slightly useful in discerning the feelings of the involved at the time.

*Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras*, 2012, viewed 18 July 2011, <http://www.mardigras.org.au/about-us/history/index.cfm>

This text was a secondary source covering the information in a concise and detached way. There did not appear to be any bias however it was deliberately emotive. Overall this information was very useful and easy to comprehend.