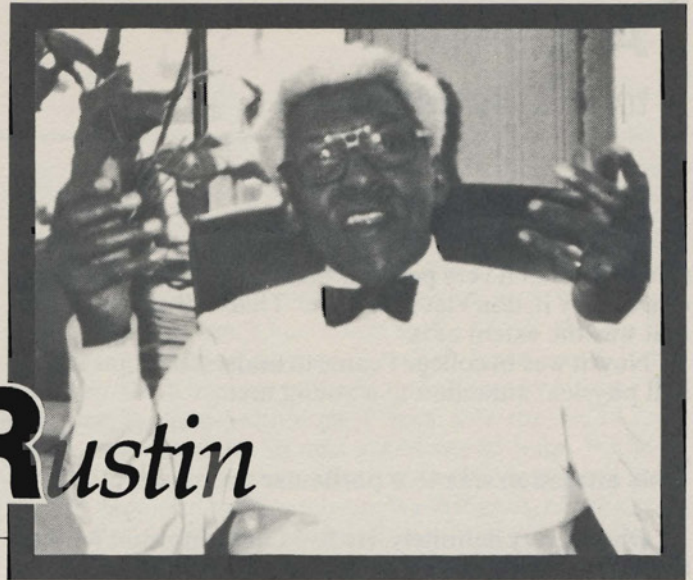


# An Interview with Bayard Rustin

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK BOWMAN



**Starting back at the beginning, in West Chester, Pennsylvania, what did you absorb, spoken or unspoken, about homosexuality in your upbringing?**

**B**ayard Rustin is one of the outstanding human rights proponents and strategists of our day. Usually working out of the public spotlight, Rustin's socioeconomic analysis, commitment to nonviolent social change, and tactical organizing have been integral to the civil rights, pacifist, and trade union movements of the mid-20th century.

Born March 17, 1912, in West Chester, Pennsylvania, Rustin's early life was influenced by the Quaker pacifism of his grandmother and his personal experiences of a segregated society. After studies at Wilberforce College, Cheyney State College, and the City College of New York, Rustin became race relations director for the Fellowship of Reconciliation. At this time Rustin also began his long-time association with A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, serving as youth organizer for Randolph's march on Washington.

Standing firm to his convictions on justice, nonviolence, and human equality, Rustin served more than two years in Lewisburg Penitentiary as a conscientious objector during World War II and, thereafter, served 30 days on a North Carolina chain gang for his participation in the first Freedom Ride in the South.

In 1955 Rustin became a special assistant to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He helped organize the Montgomery bus boycott and drew up the plans for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. At the behest of King and Randolph, Rustin was the chief organizer of the 1963 March on Washington. Rustin's influence expanded the agenda for this gathering of 250,000 people beyond demands for integration to include fundamental economic and social reforms.

Rustin founded the A. Philip Randolph Institute in 1964 to build coalitions for social change between the labor movement, the black community, and other groups. While serving as executive director there, he has become increasingly well-known as a commentator on human rights and social change.

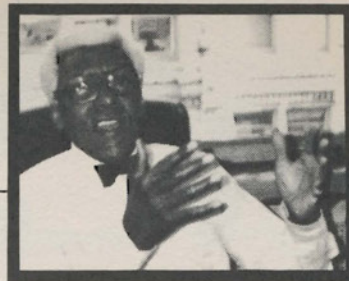
As a gay man, Bayard Rustin has been subjected to private and public castigation throughout his career. While, in his own words, he "never came out of the closet with flags flying," Rustin has not compromised his position as a social pioneer who happens to be gay. In this interview with Open Hands, Rustin addresses this part of his life most often ignored in other public forums.

My early life was that of being a member of a very, very close-knit family. I was born illegitimate. My mother was about 17 when I was born, and, consequently, my grandparents reared me. The family members were largely Democrats, long before most other Black families. My grandmother was one of the leaders of the NAACP; she had helped found the Black Nurses' Society and the Black community center.

There were two homosexual boys in high school that were rather flamboyant, and the community, I think, looked down on their flamboyance much more than on their homosexuality. But, in general, the question of homosexuality never emerged as a social problem until I got to college. What I heard in high school was: Why don't those guys behave themselves? Why are they always doing something outlandish?

As far as my early life is concerned, there was one other incident. There was one young man who was very highly respected in the community that I can remember as a child hearing whispering about. But I never could put my finger on what it was that made him, in the eyes of people, different. One of the reasons that this was confusing to me was that he was highly respected—he was a member of the church, sang in the choir, played the organ, and seemed to be such a responsible, talented, and charming person that I could never get quite what it was that was being whispered about him. I asked my grandmother once, and she said "Oh, well, he's just a little different from other people and I wouldn't pay any attention to it." On one occasion this fellow was visiting our home, and when he was leaving he put his arms around me and kissed me (which had never happened to me with a man before). Later when I was discussing him with my grandmother, I said "You know it's very interesting, but this is the second time that he has hugged me and tried to kiss me." My grandmother simply said, "Well, did you enjoy it?" And I

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said "No, I felt it very peculiar." And she said, "Well, if you don't enjoy it, don't let him do it." That's all she said. And that was the extent of it.

Now it was in college I came to understand that I had a real physical attraction to a young man.

### **This attraction was to a particular young man?**

Oh yes, very definitely. He lived in California. We were both at Wilberforce College in Ohio. He used to come home with me for the holidays. I had a bedroom of my own, but it had twin beds in it—he slept in his bed and I slept in mine. We never had any physical relationship but a very intense, friendly relationship. At that point, I knew exactly what was going on, but I did not feel then that I could handle such a physical relationship. But I never went through any trauma about coming out because I realized what was going on. I was also strong and secure enough to be able to handle it. But I have always sympathized with people who, for one reason or another, go through the great trauma that I never experienced.

### **Can you say a little more about how you handled your coming out?**

There was one young man at home who was interested in me when I came back from college. (This is what makes me know that my grandmother knew what was happening.) My grandmother called me into the kitchen one Saturday morning (we always had sort of weekly talks on Saturday morning in the kitchen while we were preparing lunch), and she said, "You know I want to recommend something to you. In selecting your male friends, you should be careful that you associate with people who have as much to lose as you have." And I said, "What do you mean, as much to lose as I have?" She said, "Well, you have a very good reputation, so you should go around with people who have good reputations. You are being educated; you must make friends with people who are being educated. You have certain values, and you must make certain that people you go out with hold those values. Otherwise you could find yourself in very serious trouble. Because very often people who do not have as much to lose as you have can be very careless in befriending you because they are careless in befriending themselves." I think that a family in which the members know and accept one's lifestyle is the most helpful factor for emotional stability. They were aware that I was having an affair with my friend from college, and they obviously approved it. Not that anybody said, "Oh, I think it's a good thing." But they would say, "Friends have invited us over for dinner tonight, and we told them that your friend is here, and they said it's quite all right for you to bring him

along." There was never any conflict. And yet there was never any real discussion.

### **A few years later you moved to New York City. The clubs in Harlem in the 1930s and 1940s were known as meccas for gay men and lesbians. Did you interact in that world?**

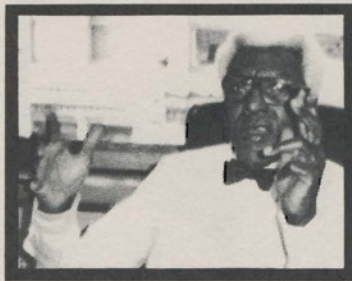
Well, Harlem was a totally different world than I had known. When I came to New York, I lived with a sister (really my aunt) who lived on St. Nicholas Avenue, which was at that time the main thoroughfare of Black New York aristocracy—it was called Sugar Hill. That's where the Black doctors, the lawyers, the professionals, and ministers lived. In the Black upper class there were a great number of gay people. So long as they did not publicize their gayness, there was little or no discussion of it. A number of the poets, artists, musicians were gay or lesbian. And the clubs paid little attention. In that early period there were few gay clubs because there didn't need to be. The gay clubs came later, with World War II and after. I think that the Black community has been largely willing to accept its gay elements so long as they were not openly gay. It was later when the gay clubs came, and gay men and lesbians wanted the right to come out of the closet, that I think the Black community became quite as intolerant as the white community.

### **Why is that, in your estimation? What caused the resistance to acceptance?**

Well, I think the community felt that we have, as Blacks, so many problems to put up with, and we have to defend ourselves so vigorously against being labeled as ignorant, irresponsible, shufflers, etc., there's so much prejudice against us, why do we need the gay thing, too? I remember on one occasion somebody said to me, "Goodness gracious! You're a socialist, you're a conscientious objector, you're gay, you're Black, how many jeopardies can you afford?" I found that people in the civil rights movement were perfectly willing to accept me so long as I didn't declare that I was gay.

### **During those years in New York were there any gay or lesbian role models for you?**

Hall Johnson, leader of the Hall Johnson Choir, was gay and one of the most important Black musicians of his time. He was probably the key role model for me. He was responsible for helping train people like Leontyne Price and all kinds of other opera singers, and was the inspiration for many other musicians. I used to go to his



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apartment. It was never a hangout for gay men and lesbians; it was a hangout for musicians and artists. And if you were gay or lesbian (and there were many of us) you were there too.

**As you began working for the Fellowship of Reconciliation, did it seem like you were leading a double life—moving in the artist and musician circles in New York and becoming involved in the different sphere of human rights activists?**

It was amongst the Fellowship people that there was hypocrisy—more so-called love and affection and non-violence toward the human family, but it was there that I found some of the worst attitudes to gays. I experienced this personally after I'd been released from working with the Fellowship when I was arrested in California on what they called a "morals charge." Many of the people in the Fellowship of Reconciliation were absolutely intolerant in their attitudes. When I lost my job there, some of these nonviolent Christians despite their love and affection for humanity were not really able to express very much affection to me. Wherein members of my family (a couple of them had actually fought in the war) were loving, considerate, and accepting. So there are times when people of goodwill may find it difficult to maintain consistency between belief and action. This can be very difficult for some people when faced with a homosexual relationship.

**Later, in the early '60s, Adam Clayton Powell threatened to expose you, and J. Strom Thurmond did make accusations against you. Did you experience many other incidents like these?**

Yes, for example, Martin Luther King, with whom I worked very closely, became very distressed when a number of the ministers working for him wanted him to dismiss me from his staff because of my homosexuality. Martin set up a committee to discover what he should do. They said that, despite the fact that I had contributed tremendously to the organization (I drew up the plans for the creation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and did most of the planning and fundraising in the early days), they thought that I should separate myself from Dr. King.

**When was this, the late 1950s?**

This was about 1960 actually. This was the time when Powell threatened to expose my so-called homosexual relationship with Dr. King. There, of course, was no

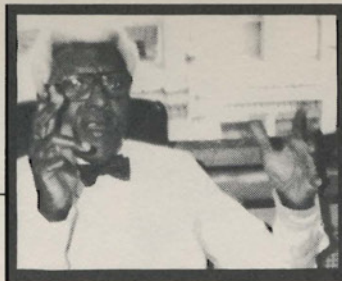
homosexual relationship with Dr. King. But Martin was so uneasy about it that I decided I did not want Dr. King to have to dismiss me. I had come to the SCLC to help. If I was going to be a burden I would leave—and I did. However Dr. King was never happy about my leaving. He was deeply torn—although I had left the SCLC, he frequently called me in and asked me to help. While in 1960 he felt real pressure to fire me, in 1963 he agreed that I should organize the March on Washington, of which he was one of the leaders.

**During those tumultuous times when your private life was threatened to be exposed, how did you deal with that? Whom did you find support from?**

In June of 1963, Senator Strom Thurmond stood in the Congress and denounced the March on Washington because I was organizing it. He called me a communist, a sexual pervert, a draft dodger, etc. The next day Mr. A. Phillip Randolph called all the Black leaders and said, "I want to answer Strom Thurmond's attack. But I think we ought not to get involved in a big discussion of homosexuality or communism or draft dodging. What I want to do, with the approval of all the Black leaders, is to issue a statement which says: 'We, the Black leaders of the civil rights movements and the leaders of the trade union movement and the leaders of the Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic church which are organizing this march have absolute confidence in Bayard Rustin's ability, his integrity, and his commitment to nonviolence as the best way to bring about social change. He will continue to organize the March with our full and undivided support.'" He said, "If any of you are called, I do not want any discussion beyond that—Is he a homosexual? Has he been arrested? We simply say we have complete confidence in him and his integrity." And that's exactly what happened.

Someone came to Mr. Randolph once and said, "Do you know that Bayard Rustin is a homosexual? Do you know he has been arrested in California? I don't know how you could have anyone who is a homosexual working for you." Mr. Randolph said, "Well, well, if Bayard, a homosexual, is that talented—and I know the work he does for me—maybe I should be looking for somebody else homosexual who could be so useful." Mr. Randolph was such a completely honest person who wanted everyone else also to be honest. Had anyone said to him, "Mr. Randolph, do you think I should openly admit that I am homosexual?," his attitude, I am sure, would have been, "Although such an admission may cause you problems, you will be happier in the long run." Because his idea was that you have to be what you are.

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**You were involved in many civil rights groups in the '40s, '50s, '60s, '70s. Did any of them at least begin to internally think about lesbian/gay rights?**

After my arrest (in California in '53), I tried to get the Black community to face up to the fact that one of the reasons that some homosexuals went to places where they might well be arrested was that they were not welcome elsewhere. I wanted to get people to change their attitudes, but they always made it personal. They would say, "Well, now, Bayard, we understand—we know who you are and we know what you are, but you're really different." And I'd say, "I don't want to hear that. I want you to change your attitudes." But there was little action, and even now it's very difficult to get the Black community doing anything constructive about AIDS because it is thought of as a "gay" problem."

**Looking back over your whole life, in what ways did your being a gay man affect the person that you are, the person you have been?**

Oh, I think it has made a great difference. When one is attacked for being gay, it sensitizes you to a greater understanding and sympathy for others who face bigotry, and one realizes the damage that being misunderstood can do to people. It's quite all right when people blast my politics. That's their obligation. But to attack anyone because he's Jewish, Black, a homosexual, a woman, or any other reason over which that person has no control is quite terrible. But making my peace and adjusting to being attacked has helped me to grow. It's given me a certain sense of obligation to other people, and it's given me a maturity as well as a sense of humor.

You were asking about role models earlier—I think one of the best, most helpful, Black men in the '20s and '30s and '40s was a professor at Howard University whose name was Alain Locke. I got to know Alain Locke very well. He was gay and held open house for the literati and for young people like young Langston Hughes and Richard Wright. I suspect that he was probably more of a male role model for me than anyone else. He never felt it necessary to discuss his gayness. He was always a friend to those who were aspiring to be writers. Therefore, he universalized his affection to people. And he carried himself in such a way that the most people could say about him was that they suspected he was gay, not that he was mean or that he was in any way unkind. So I find that it's very important for members of a minority group to develop an inner security. For in that way we become fearless and very decent human beings.

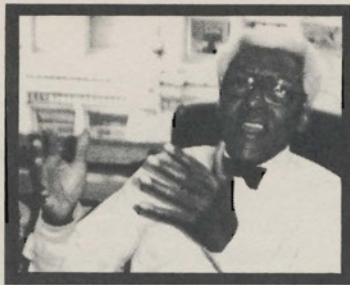
I shall never forget once at a meeting, a chap from the Fellowship of Reconciliation accused me of impairing the morals of minors and stated that the organization should

not permit me to associate with all the youngsters in the organization. A young man stood up at this meeting and said something which was so amazing I have never forgotten about it. He said, "I want this group to know that I am now 22, and I went to bed with Bayard Rustin last year. And it was a culmination of five years of the most profound and deep friendship and love that I have ever known. And I am *not* homosexual, and I will marry, and I promise you now, if my first child is a boy, I'm going to name him Bayard. I learned so many important and good things from him. That's why I want my firstborn named Bayard." Now that took a tremendous amount of nerve on his part. Four years later he named his firstborn Bayard.

**If you had to do it all over, if you had to live life knowing what you know now, would you want to be gay?**

I think, if I had a choice, I would probably elect not to be gay. Because I think that I might be able to do more to fight against the prejudice to gays if I weren't gay, because some people say I'm simply trying to defend myself. But that's the only reason. I want to get rid of all kinds of prejudices. And, quite frankly, one of the prejudices which I find most difficult is the prejudice that some Black homosexuals have to white homosexuals, the prejudice that Oriental homosexuals have to everybody but Oriental homosexuals, and certainly the tremendous amount of prejudice that some white gay men and lesbians have to Blacks. And the reason this is sad to me is not that I expect homosexuals to be any different basically than any other human being, but it is sad because I do not believe that they know that it is not prejudice to any one group that is the problem, it is prejudice itself that is the problem.

That brings me to a very important point—people who do not fight against all kinds of prejudice are doing three terrible things. They are, first of all, perpetuating harm to others. Secondly, they are denying their own selves because every heterosexual is a part of homosexuality and every homosexual is part of this so-called straight world. If I harm any human being by my bigotry, I am, at the same time, harming myself because I'm a part of that person. And, finally, every indifference to prejudice is suicide because, if I don't fight all bigotry, bigotry itself will be strengthened and, sooner or later, it will turn on me. I think that one of the things we have to be very careful of in the gay and lesbian community is that we do not under any circumstances permit ourselves to hold on to any indifference to the suffering of any other human being. The homosexuals who did not fight Hitler's prejudice to the Jews finally got it. Now they may have gotten it anyhow. But when the Gestapo came up the stairs after them, they would have died knowing that they were better human beings if only they had fought facism and resisted when the Jews were being murdered.



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**Are you hopeful for the human race? Do you think prejudice will be overcome? Do you think it's improved during your lifetime?**

Oh, I think, it's improved some places; it's gotten worse in others. But I have learned a very significant lesson from the Jewish prophets. If one really follows the commandments of these prophets, the question of hopeful or nonhopeful may become secondary or unimportant. Because these prophets taught that God does not require us to achieve any of the good tasks that humanity must pursue. What God requires of us is that we not stop trying. And, therefore, I do not expect that we can do anything more than reduce prejudice to an irreducible minimum. We have the responsibility to try to improve economic and social conditions which I believe may well reduce human problems. As long as there's this much unemployment amongst Blacks and poor Hispanics and poor whites, they will prey on each other. Secondly, we can try to deal with problems of injustice by setting up a legal structure which outlaws them and causes people to be punished if they violate them. There's a third way, and this is what I call the way of reconciliation. If you can get enough law and you can get an economic structure, then you can get people to live together in harmony, to go to school together, and they will cooperate in the work force. Then there is a deep learning process in which new stimuli will create new responses. Now these are three of the ways in which I believe we can try to reduce prejudice.

I want to say a word while I'm on this, about the uniqueness of the gay and lesbian community today. The gay community now becomes the most important element when it comes to answering the question that you have raised about hope. Because the gay community today has taken over where the Black community left off in '68 or '69. In those days Black people were the barometer of social change; Black people were the litmus paper of social change. At that time if a person was prepared to accept Blacks then it followed that that person was prepared to look at Jews, Catholics, and other persons. Today gay men and lesbians have taken over that social role. Because theirs is now the central problem and, if you are to go to the bottom line, if people cannot accept gay men and lesbians, they may not be able to accept anybody who is different.

That is what makes the homosexual central to how much progress we can make in human rights. That means there must be among gay men and lesbians themselves tremendous political activity. And that means now that we have an additional good reason for coming out of the closet. We cannot really respect ourselves unless we're willing to state quite honestly who we are. Beyond this there's now another reason why we must come out of the closet, and that is to help carry on the real political struggle for acceptance. Because if you do not fight for

yourself in a very vigorous way, you cannot expect anybody to join in a fight with you.

**Do you have any observations, looking historically, at the Black civil rights movement and the lesbian/gay civil rights movement—where have there been similarities; where have there been differences?**

Well, I think the moral question is similar. But after you get beyond that question, I think there are not many similarities. The gay and lesbian community is not a community which looks any one way; it is not a community which behaves in any one way. Wherein Blacks all look Black (which is not true, but people think so) and they have certain things you can point to—they were once slaves, they were once uneducated—gay men and lesbians tend to belong to a more educated, college-trained group. Gay men and lesbians are not all in that group, by any means, but the visible ones are.

The prejudice to gay men and lesbians is much deeper. Those who fight against gay men and lesbians carry a propaganda which is designed to strike deeply at the most fundamental concerns of our society. Antigay/lesbian proponents will argue that humanity must have the family and gay men and lesbians are anti-family. The society advances only as there are children. Gay men and lesbians will not produce children. The society will only exist as long as there is a high standard of moral behavior. Gay men particularly are pictured as running around having sex with everybody in sight and not concerned with anything other than their own immediate pleasure and satisfaction. Now you and I know that much of that is decidedly untrue. But gay men and lesbians are looked on as being an unstable element when what you need in the society is stability. As I said this propaganda has been carefully designed.

Beyond all this, the bigots argue that segments of both the Old and the New Testament have denounced homosexuality as an abomination. If one goes through the scriptures and picks out little pieces of this and that, it's possible to distort. You know, those who believe you shouldn't have anything to drink find the little place in the Bible that justifies that attitude. Those who want to drink will quote St. Paul and say "A little wine is good for thy stomach's sake." People will pick out what they want rather than seeing the scriptures as a growth in spiritual insight. The people who want to carry on racial prejudice will no longer talk about this as the way that God wants it. But people will still tell you that homosexuality is ungodly and destructive. That's what I mean when I say that gay men and lesbians have now become the barometer and the litmus paper of human rights attitudes and social change. □