

CULTURE

Creating the First Visual History of Queer Life Before Stonewall



Making a landmark documentary about LGBTQ Americans before 1969 meant digging through countless archives to find traces of a forgotten subculture.

By Andrea Weiss



The writer, Andrea Weiss, and the *Before Stonewall* director, Greta Schiller, in the 1980s (Andrea Weiss)

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SHARE AS GIFT  SAVE 

Fifty years ago, at a grungy, Mafia-owned bar in Greenwich Village, a group of gay, lesbian, and transgender patrons who had long endured the harassment of random police raids reached a breaking point. Spontaneously and collectively, they refused to be herded into a paddy wagon for their umpteenth arrest. Their resistance spilled out of the Stonewall Inn on Christopher Street and into the neighboring blocks, not only sparking six days of rioting but also inadvertently launching a worldwide movement for LGBTQ equality.

In 1969, these drag queens, male sex workers, butch lesbians, and androgynous youths—many of them people of color—lived so far outside of the cultural zeitgeist that they barely registered on the broader American public’s radar. The riots were deemed so insignificant that neither *Time* magazine nor *Life* magazine covered them; not even the three main TV channels that existed back then bothered to send a cameraman.

If zero newsreel or TV coverage and scant photographs were taken during the riots—the most public display of queer life thus far in U.S. history—then how excluded from the cultural record were LGBTQ people on an ordinary, *non*-newsworthy day? This shroud of invisibility hanging over queer Americans before Stonewall made finding even faint visual traces of this subculture’s existence a challenge. Yet that’s exactly what I set out to do back in 1982, when I embarked on two years of intensive research in film and photo archives for ***Before Stonewall***, a groundbreaking documentary about queer life in America before 1969. Nearly 35 years after its premiere, the film is being rereleased in theaters nationwide this summer, compelling me to look back on the many systemic difficulties I encountered while making it and how the project indelibly shaped my path forward as a documentarian.

In 1982, I was 25 years old with no career plan. I hadn’t worked on a movie before or stepped foot in an archive. While I had a passion for film and history, my main qualification for the job of archival-research director for ***Before Stonewall*** was that I was having an affair with the director, Greta Schiller. I can still hear the sage advice the production manager, Amy Chen, gave me on my first day: “Any self-doubt you have about your ability to do this, keep to yourself.”

Before Stonewall sought to trace the development of the queer subculture in the United States, weaving together interviews, archival footage, music, and some minimal narration by the lesbian author Rita Mae Brown to provide historical context. My work, which involved locating just about all of the film’s imagery apart from the interviews, was carried out well before the internet existed. Gay and lesbian images were not yet identified or categorized as such in the card catalogs of libraries. While the word *lesbian* hardly surfaced in mainstream conversation at all and *gay* was still a slang word, even the more proper and well-known term *homosexual* was nowhere to be found. Whenever I told an archivist the topic of my research, I received this reaction: an uncomfortable pause, then closer scrutiny of my persona for signs of deviance, then a response like, “Uh, we don’t, um, I’m sure we don’t have anything like that.”

Old-fashioned homophobia may have provoked this answer, but there was a new reason why many people feared and despised gay people: The year 1982 marked the beginning of the AIDS crisis in New York, although it wasn’t known yet as the AIDS crisis. ***The New York Times*** first reported that May on the existence of something called GRID, or Gay-Related Immune Deficiency, which became known colloquially as “the gay plague.” For many, the liberating post-Stonewall decade of the 1970s came to a halt and was replaced by a more somber mood. No one knew how HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, was transmitted, so you’d frequently find yourself asking such

questions as, “Do I dare to dip my tortilla chip into a shared bowl of guacamole, or is that a life-threatening mistake?” My father, to whom I hadn’t yet come out, told me to be vigilant about physical contact with my co-workers on the film; no one would want to watch a film about “those people” anyway, he said. It was against this backdrop of anonymity and hostility that I worked to find visual evidence of a subculture that had largely colluded in its own invisibility in order to survive. One asset I did have was a friend who lived nearby, Vito Russo, who was working on a book he jokingly referred to as *Spot the Homo*. Later published as *The Celluloid Closet*, it’s now considered the bedrock resource on gay and lesbian scenes in Hollywood films. (Vito was one of several friends and colleagues who helped with the documentary and who fell victim to AIDS; he died in 1990.) He’d call me up with suggestions for movies to see, and clips from several of these titles made it into *Before Stonewall*. But Hollywood films mostly offered up a litany of lesbian and gay stereotypes—perhaps useful for illustrating the contempt with which mainstream society viewed homosexuality, but not exactly how we hoped to present the lived experiences of real people. Turning my attention to newsreel films—the precursor to TV news—I took the train to Washington, D.C., and ensconced myself in the National Archives’ motion-picture division. Each day, I roamed the card catalogs, unsure of which drawers to open. Direct search terms (*homosexuality*, for instance) yielded nothing, so I got inventive. I looked under such vague headings as “Street Scenes,” “Vice Crimes,” or my favorite, “Oddities”—a catchall label for random, socially unexpected events. It was here I might find, for example, a group of women playing sports or engaged in other activities considered the domain of men. The titles I pulled were delivered to me the next day on a cart: big, bulky, and sometimes brittle 35-mm film reels I’d handle with white gloves and watch on an old Steenbeck editing machine.

If you weren’t careful threading the machine, or if you tried to fast-forward, you risked tearing the sprockets, so watching in real time was safer. I viewed newsreel after newsreel until my eyes glazed

over, and still I didn’t catch sight of anything that outwardly hinted at the existence of a queer community. For that matter, I didn’t see many women or people of color; not surprisingly, the newsreel genre is biased in favor of the “great white man” approach to history. When I finished at the National Archives, I moved on to the Library of Congress, the Kinsey Institute, the UCLA Film and Television Archive, and countless other collections. I spent far more time in archives than in my apartment during those two years. For me, the shelves weren’t full of musty documents, photographs, and film reels, but mysterious keys that held some vague promise, if I could only decipher their secrets.



The writer, feminist, and activist Audre Lorde (right) and a friend (First Run Features)

Eventually, I had to broaden my approach. I figured that any time I saw a group of people congregated on film—in the Army, on a street corner, at the golf course—some percentage of those people could be gay. In some cases, I gave myself license to assume that they were, for the purposes of building a visual history that rewrote queerness back into the broader tapestry of American life, however imperfectly. *What does a gay person look like, anyway, I wondered, especially one who has lived a life in the closet?* In 1985, I wrote in the *New York Native*, the city's biweekly gay rag: "It became even more a question of *how* than it was of *where* to look ... The process of unearthing a gay iconography involves seeing with double vision. Absence as image. Erasure as image."

Today I find that quote and its reference to "double vision" and "absence as image" astonishing. My younger self hadn't yet heard of W. E. B. Du Bois's "double-consciousness," a term he coined in 1897 to describe the way black Americans felt compelled to view themselves both through their own eyes and through the eyes of mainstream white society. At the time, I also didn't know people were questioning the authority of the archive, or examining it for signs of what had been suppressed. I wrote those words a decade before Michel-Rolph Trouillot would publish his influential book on the subject, ***Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History***, and three decades before I would read it. I was attempting to read the silences in the archives out of frustration and a lack of alternatives. I didn't realize that, by doing so, I was playing a small role in a revolution in Western culture that was quietly brewing, one that would soon transform what is generally understood to be "history."

Occasionally I stumbled on surprises in the newsreels that challenged the archivists' insistence that they had no images of "homosexuals." I saw these rare finds as transgressions, where the archive as an institution momentarily lost its power to control which images would be recorded and which would be forgotten. Once, searching under "Vice Crimes," I came across footage of a 1959 police raid of a bar packed with drag queens, who played to the camera and strutted, as if on a catwalk, into the back of a paddy wagon. In another archive, searching under "Street Scenes," I was watching random film footage of Greenwich Village in the '50s and '60s when I spotted a bespectacled young man, tall, thin, and vivacious. I recognized him as the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg, chatting away with his friend Jack Kerouac. By coincidence, the ***Before Stonewall*** team was scheduled to interview Ginsberg the following week—he was no longer young or thin, but just as vivacious.

After exhausting official sources, I turned to unofficial ones. By long-distance telephone (thankfully the push-button was just overtaking the rotary dial at that time), I oversaw a team of 12 researchers spread out across the country who were charged with finding queer elders in their communities and charming those elders into handing over photo scrapbooks and home movies. My team found convincing white, gay men that their personal memorabilia had historical value relatively easy, while women—especially women of color—tended to be far more reluctant. Lesbians were more financially vulnerable and culturally invisible; many had lived so long in the closet that coming out in a movie was akin to taking a trip to the moon. Finally, one day Greta announced: "No more white men, no matter how interesting. We have enough." The challenges of my job seemed to quadruple in that moment.

We faced other challenges, too: For every snapshot or home-movie reel we got, we had to track down everyone in it to sign a clearance form. The risk of someone's image appearing in a context that implied they were gay, even in an old photograph, was too great to take without their approval. *Before Stonewall*'s production office began to resemble a missing-persons bureau. We had to restrain ourselves from jumping for joy when, after hitting many dead ends, we discovered the person we were trying to locate had already passed away—meaning he or she no longer had a legal right to privacy. Slowly but surely, out of the trust we established and the materials we amassed, the *Before Stonewall* team quilted together the first visual history of queer America.

The film was released in 1985, premiering in the United States at Sundance (before it was called Sundance) and screening at international festivals, where it won numerous awards. It opened in American cinemas, which was rare for a documentary in those days, and broke box-office records at New York's Waverly Theater. When *Before Stonewall* was broadcast via PBS in 1987, earning me the first Emmy ever awarded for research, we received letters from people around the country saying what a lifeline the film was for them, how it publicly validated their life and helped them see for the first time that they were part of a larger history.

At the time, I never imagined that I would go on to have a long and successful career as a documentary filmmaker, producing movies about little-known chapters in the history of women, LGBTQ people, African Americans, and progressive movements. I had no inkling that, several years later, I'd return to school to earn a doctorate in American history. And it was unthinkable to me that my affair with *Before Stonewall*'s director would turn into a 37-year personal relationship and professional partnership, or that one day we'd go down to city hall to get married.

With *Before Stonewall* back in cinemas this month, I've had the opportunity to see it on the big screen several times. I'm now the age of the people we interviewed for the film, who seemed so old and wise to me back then. Over the past few decades, the field of LGBTQ history has emerged and solidified, and many documentaries have been made. These films, such as Paris Poirier's *Last Call at Maud's* (1993), about the history of lesbian bar culture, or Arthur Dong's documentary *Coming Out Under Fire* (1994), about military policy regarding homosexuals during World War II, have homed in on aspects of queer life that we couldn't spend much time on.

Of course, the internet has changed just about everything. Today researchers can skip the experience of rummaging through card catalogs or wearing white gloves while staring at delicate 35-mm film. Despite the obvious benefits of the World Wide Web, for me it can't replace the physical archive, a place where I've chosen to spend huge chunks of my professional life. My filmmaking since *Before Stonewall* has involved digging into its treasures, searching for the historically invisible. Sometimes the task feels impossible, and I'm full of self-doubt. But decades ago, starting with my first day on the job, I learned to keep those moments to myself and just get on with it.

LINK to article: <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/06/before-stonewall-documentary-archives-history-invisible/592675/>
