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Marsha P. Johnson: Police Stonewall Murder

by Randy Wicker

One week and one day after NYC's 1992 Gay Pride celebration, the body of Marsha P. Johnson was pulled from the Hudson River at the foot of Christopher Street.

Marsha, believed to be the first drag queen to have thrown her shoes (hefty size 11 1/2) at the cops raiding the Stonewall Bar, was one of the best known and most universally popular gay historical figures in America.

Anatomically a well built African American male, "Marsha" always used the gender inappropriate name whether dressed as male or female. "She" was the pronoun of choice even among heterosexuals who knew her personally. Although male Marsha was a truly feminine persona - a gender bending one of a kind original. Exceedingly generous, warm and caring, she would be hilariously funny most of the time but could occasionally lapse into being simply outrageously loud and tacky.

Less than 24 hours after her body surfaced, following a two phone call non-investigation of her death, 6th Precinct Detective James Abrieu declared Marsha's mysterious demise a "suicide".

Well known panhandler and street personality on Christopher Street, Black gay, HIV positive, on SSI for mental disability and with a West Side Highway transvestite/prostitution arrest record dating back to 1962, Marsha P. Johnson, although revered as a virtual living saint by many, was an unimportant throw away non-person in the eyes of the law.

The entire gay community mourned her. Heritage of Pride ran a glowing \$400 paid tribute to her in the New York Times obituary column. Over four hundred friends celebrated and remembered Marsha's life last July 26th, filling Duane Methodist Church to overflowing. Finally they marched her ashes, under police escort provided by the Mayor's office, under a street wide arch of rainbow balloons, down Christopher Street to the very spot where her body had been pulled from the river.



Marsha P. Johnson, Easter 1992, at Boots & Saddle bar on Christopher Street. Photo: Rick Peters

Earlier, outraged friends had marched on the 6th Precinct knowing Marsha was incapable of suicide, demanding a real investigation into her death.

In September, an eyewitness came forward and filed a police report describing how a teenage gang of straight drug dealers - four males and two females - had been physically harassing Marsha, trying to force a joint in her mouth, calling her "faggot" and other names, and had lifted her into the air so threateningly that he had asked a nearby policeman to intervene. All of this happened just a few feet from the exact spot where Marsha's body had come up from the river's bottom 36 hours later.

After three months of protests, leaflets, tabling and lobbying by Marsha's friends, and faced with continuing complaints from several city officials, including City Councilman Tom Duane, Mayor David Dinkins, City Council President Andrew Stein, and the gay community's Anti Violence Project, the NYPD met with Marsha's two sisters and brother, Marsha's roommate, AVP representatives and Tom Duane to reconsider the "suicide" determination.

In a highly unusual action, the NYPD reversed its earlier finding and reclassified Marsha's death as "drowning of unknown cause." Despite this widely acclaimed "Gay Rights Victory," Bonnie Toney, the eyewitness, was never shown mug shots to try and identify Marsha's probable murderers.

6/8/93 - POLICE ARE
CURRENTLY INVESTIGATING
A REPORTED JAILHOUSE
CONFESSION TO MARSHA'S MURDER.

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