



What Gay Women Wear

by Mary Jean Haley / photos by Candy Freeland

If neither you nor your friends are gay, you can be forgiven for retaining the stereotyped image of the Gay Woman as the middle-aged *person* in the iron grey ducktail and tailored dark suit who startled the life out of you when she walked into the ladies/mens room.

But this stereotype simply does not fit the liberated gay women I recently interviewed.

Young gay women have discovered both gay liberation *and* women's liberation, and they are asserting themselves as women — beautiful gay

women. They want no part of male-female, oppression-submission roles. Don't want to look like men. Do want to look like the women they are.

"Ten years ago," says Nancy, who claims no last name, "most butchy women wore men's clothing exclusively. People's image of gay women is mostly these amazing old bull dykes." Nancy, who explains that "last names are all men's, so I don't have one of my own," is wearing tailored women's slacks and a pink shirt over a brown turtleneck.

This difference — between men's

clothes and women's slacks—is more subtle than, say, the difference between men's slacks and women's *skirts*. To Dixie McMills, a postal worker, it isn't so much the mode of dress as the *times* that have changed.

"We're still wearing men's clothes," she says. "Ten years ago they would wear men's suit jackets, loafers with white socks, crap like that. Now *everybody* else is wearing men's clothes."

These gay women have gathered in Wanda Van Dusen's living room, at her Berkeley home to talk with RAGS about the clothes they wear.

"At school," says Wanda, a UC Berkeley graduate student, "I just look like another radical student." This, she thinks, is because the hip movement and street fashions have freed gay people like they have freed everybody else.

"We're breaking down the old butch-femme roles which mimic heterosexual society," says Susan Walsh, a San Francisco furniture finisher and self-described funky dresser. "We're getting through all those layers and becoming real."

"Visually," Wanda responds, "there are no significant patterns in the way gay women look. They tend to dress according to the society they live in. In the straight world they'll wear high heels and stockings. Many gay women in LA are overdressed. They reflect the rampant consumerism that predominates there."

Susan Walsh agrees with the women's liberation analysis that consumerism oppresses women. To counter this in her own life, she wears a lot of hand-me-downs, supplemented with Salvation Army buys, and even rips off a little something from a chain store once in a while.

Jill Bray (*photo left*) sees it differently. She *digs* shopping for clothes. "I shop in Europe a lot," she says. "Here I go to Abercrombie's and Brooks Brothers. But I'll pick up odds and ends at a dime store too." Jill agrees with her sisters that pants are more comfortable for whatever you're doing. "I don't have any skirts," Jill announces rather proudly, "and I don't intend to wear them my whole life."

By no means do all Jill's friends share her no-skirt dictum. Michelle Yeoman, for instance, a leather craftsman and a part owner of Goblin's Market, a San Francisco boutique says: "I don't mind wearing a dress on social occasions or in the summer when it's hot."

About dressing for her job, Susan Walsh says: "I refinish some antiques,

and when we have some rich people coming around my boss wants me to wear a dress. I object for two reasons. One, I'm not comfortable refinishing furniture in a dress. Two—a political reason—wearing a dress implies the uniform of oppressed women. A dress shows your legs; you wear it to attract men and I don't want to. I told my boss I didn't want to have to worry about my dress flying up and he said, 'I personally find it delightful to have a woman's dress fly up.' I asked him, "Do you find it delightful to have a man's pants fall down?"

Clothes are politics.

Gay women aren't interested in attracting men and they don't dig the sidewalk comments a short skirt often draws. Nancy says, "I feel conspicuous, vulnerable, flirtatious in a skirt. When I'm out in public I try to be as inconspicuous as possible."

Susan Ellard agrees that her clothes are likely to be baggier when she's out delivering mail than when she's visiting with friends.

By this logic the Midi and the gaucho should appeal to gay women. Almost everyone we talked to said they loved the look, but no one actually *owned* either one.

Wanda is famous among her friends for her Girl Scout Uniform. When she wears a dress she likes "something as a-sexual as possible. Sort of a Catholic girl's school uniform like jumpers and sweaters. I'm not ready to dress like I'm out there in the world being fucked over. Women would approve of the way I dress more than men."

That's what it's all about for gay women. It has long been said that women dress for each other—competitively—but what do they wear to *attract* each other?

For Susan Walsh "getting all dyked up" means her shiny boots and "Salvation Army-tailored, snazzy, comfortable clothes."

Dixie used to wear her hair short but now lets it frame her face at jawbone length. "Long hair has a softening effect on the features. I don't like to see a woman who wants to look like a man. I hate Frisco jeans and I hate capri outfits too. A woman looks best as herself without trying to look like some dumb man."

"A lot of gay women," says Michelle, "would like to change, but they don't know what to do. They don't know how to dress in the first place, so they go down to Macy's and buy a pantsuit. Ugh. I like a woman to look natural. Her clothes should



Do you find it delightful to have a man's pants fall down?

suit who she is and how she feels."

For her part, Susan Ellard doesn't dig "anything that makes women look weak—frills, flimsy fabric, high heels she can't walk in." *Feminine* (or at least what the word has come to mean) is a negative concept. "It's been used against me too much," Susan explains. "Like: 'Why can't you be more *feminine*?' "

To Dixie, feminine is "like some super-Nellie queen posing and drooping. That's not what a woman is. It's just what he *thinks* a woman is."

The new emphasis on womanliness

makes it increasingly difficult for gay women to recognize each other, a source of some frustration.

"You just can't tell who's gay anymore," Jill laments, "It used to be you could tell a dyke by her hair. A lot of European gay people wear pinkie rings." Jill keeps her hair short and likes short hair on other women.

"There ought to be a law," says Susan Walsh, "that gay people have to identify themselves in some way."

Wanda is doing her part. She wears her Odd Fellows button just about everywhere. ☘