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Interview with Jim Fouratt

Jim Fouratt

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**LOUISE PETTUS ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**Interview #234
FOURATT, Jim**

FOURATT, Jim

Gay rights activist and leader, anti-war activist, and actor

Interviewed: February 28, 1993

Interviewer: Ron Chepesiuk

Index by: Alyssa Jones

Length: 1 hour, 57 minutes, 18 seconds

Abstract: In his February 28, 1993 interview with Ron Chepesiuk, Jim Fouratt discussed his involvement with the Gay Liberation Front and the anti-war movement. Fouratt is an actor and has been since before he was a gay rights activist. Fouratt explained his role as a leader in the Gay Liberation Front, a non-violent activist group. He also covered the topics of “outing”, hippies, the New Left, the Black Panther Party, J. Edgar Hoover, Stonewall, homophobia, blacklisting in Hollywood, self-empowerment, the AIDS epidemic, and non-violence versus violence. This interview was conducted for inclusion into the Louise Pettus Archives and Special Collections Oral History Program.

Keywords: Gay rights, Bohemian lifestyle, Gay Liberation Front, beatnik, hippy, New Left, Be-Ins, “outing”, McCarthy, Committee of One Million Loyal Americans, Allen Ginsberg, Black Panther Party, Eldridge Cleaver, 1960s, activism, J. Edgar Hoover, homosexuality, homophobia, Stonewall, non-violence vs. violence, Black Power/Militant Groups, Columbia University strike, blacklisting, Janet Reno, gays in the military, self-empowerment, AIDS, Weathermen (Weather Underground), FBI involvement

Interview Session (February 28, 1993): Digital File

Time Keywords

00:00:22 *Start of Interview*/Interviewer’s Introduction

00:00:32 *Question:* Can you fill in your background for me? *Answer:* JF was born in New Jersey and grew up in the state of Washington and state of Rhode Island; came from a working class family and a very young mother as an only child. JF grew up in an Irish-Catholic/Italian neighborhood.

00:02:08 *Question:* You went to Harvard. Can you elaborate on your education? *Answer:* Described himself as a sickly, queer kid and spent much of his early life bedridden and by himself. His time alone created a grand imagination.

- 00:03:14 *Question:* Do you remember when you became politically aware? *Answer:* The first political action he took was when he called in for a package from the Committee of One Million Loyal Americans. No one signed his petition. He later found out it was for Joe (Joseph) McCarthy. JF took the best parts of his Catholic schooling, the social and moral concerns, to heart and carried them with him into his political activism. JF left home to become an actor and met someone who was married to a communist (in the 1960s). She had him go to an anti-war protest in Time Square with her. Everyone was arrested. His arrest was recorded and his lawyers wanted the videos, but they had all been confiscated by the government. That was JF's first run-in with the government. JF was found guilty of crimes he did not commit and that began his radicalization. He was found guilty because "the police do not lie."
- 00:12:34 *Question:* You look like James Cagney, my favorite actor. Why did you become an actor? *Answer:* When people come from dysfunction, they often want to be more than what they were born from. When JF got into Harvard, he didn't know what to do about money, so he instead went to Seminary and worked as a priest for two years. JF just wanted to get out of Rhode Island. After leaving Seminary, JF went to New York to become an actor.
- 00:14:50 *Question:* What year were you born, just for reference? *Answer:* We don't talk about that.
- 00:12:58 *Question:* You said you were a queer kid. When did you realize that you were gay? *Answer:* JF used the word queer to mean "strange" or "different". JF always knew he was different, very popular among girls. JF grew up Catholic, so he wasn't supposed to be with women anyway, so being gay helped him. He didn't acknowledge that he was gay until he went to New York. Before Gay Liberation one wasn't really out, but he did not pretend to be straight because of the Bohemian lifestyle that he had been exposed to in New York at a young age (17 years old when he moved to N.Y.).
- 00:18:35 *Question:* Were you aware of the need to fight for Gay Rights or stand up for yourself as an individual? *Answer:* JF discussed his knowledge of the movement, but wondered how he could get involved as an actor. Gayness was accepted in the acting community, but no one was supposed to speak of it. JF discussed the Bohemian life. JF got involved with the gay rights movement at the end of the Beatnik Era.
- 00:20:34 *Question:* What year was this? *Answer:* 1962 or '63. JF continued story about getting involved with the movement.
- 00:21:31 *Question:* You were making a living through acting then? *Answer:* Yes. Acting was different back then; it was much more than it was in the 1990s.

- 00:22:00 *Question:* The New Left was starting to organize. Were you aware of this? *Answer:* Yes, JF was aware of it because one of his early inspirations was Carl Wittman.
- 00:22:50 *Question:* You were aware of the war escalating? *Answer:* Yes, JF took part in a demonstration. JF was living two parallel lives; the apolitical life of acting, and his political life. JF discusses getting hepatitis and why he became a hippy. JF grew out his hair while in the hospital when the hippies were just starting.
- 00:24:03 *Question:* What year was this (the hospitalization)? *Answer:* 1965. The hippies were just beginning and decided that they should have a Be-In in New York, so he called up some of his friends. That's how JF was noticed by Abbie Hoffman.
- 00:24:45 *Question:* That was your first time meeting him? *Answer:* Not the first time, but JF was very visible at the time. JF was the hippy that the *New York Times* would talk to when the others shied away from the media.
- 00:26:56 *Question:* I think 1965 was the year of the big West Coast Homophile organization protest in Washington. *Answer:* Those were the kind of people JF didn't like.
- 00:27:12 *Question:* You didn't? *Answer:* They wanted to be accepted and that's not what JF wanted out of life.
- 00:28:06 *Question:* How were you accepted in society? *Answer:* It (JF being gay) wasn't talked about.
- 00:29:30 *Question:* You must have been subjected to stigmatism because of the time period. You still had to deal with the rest of society, outside of the artist community. *Answer:* True, but JF didn't dwell on what other people thought. JF lived in an artist ghetto in NYC and knew how to survive.
- 00:30:34 *Question:* The transition into a hippy came after 1965? Was it a slow or fast transition? *Answer:* JF talked about being a part of the movement and how he was often not recorded in history because he is gay.
- 00:31:46 *Question:* You became more militant in your leading of the movement? *Answer:* JF became more militant about the war and gay rights. JF said the hippy movement was a political one, even if many didn't believe that. The failure of the hippy movement's failure was that they didn't want to be political.
- 00:33:33 *Question:* When did the FBI ask you about how you got your money? *Answer:* JF had the FBI in his life once he got involved with the movement; the first arrest. The FBI was under J. Edgar Hoover at the time.

- 00:33:41 *Question:* Have you looked at your file? *Answer:* JF saw as much as he could get, but much of his file was blacked out.
- 00:33:52 *Question:* They thought you were subversive. *Answer:* Yes, all homosexuals were assumed to be subversive.
- 00:33:59 *Question:* That was in your file, too? That's ironic considering Hoover's background. *Answer:* JF wasn't surprised because homophobia was internalized and Hoover was obsessed with it.
- 00:34:37 *Question:* You were part of the counterculture. Were you into drugs? LSD? *Answer:* Not really, JF always pretended he was into those things. Ginsberg got JF into speed. JF considered LSD a sacrament.
- 00:36:08 *Question:* Were there a lot of homosexuals in the movement? *Answer:* Yes, but they were closeted.
- 00:36:15 *Question:* They weren't out like you? *Answer:* No, JF was seen as a threat. Allen Ginsberg did not like gay people (to flirt with), but he loved to seduce straight people. Ginsberg loved to be the homosexual person among the straight people. Ginsberg didn't identify as gay until later in life.
- 00:37:31 *Question:* You didn't hang out in gay bars then, did you? You had straight friends. *Answer:* JF did go to gay bars at that time and always had straight friends. In the sixties, the *avant garde* community was run by homosexuals. JF really only identified with the "open" homosexual of the arts community.
- 00:39:18 *Question:* Homophobia affected you? *Answer:* Yes, getting jobs and holding them was difficult because of his homosexuality. JF was fired from an airlines company. JF tried to keep himself out of such situations.
- 00:42:40 *Question:* Why are you against "outing"? *Answer:* JF understood what happens when one comes out, what one gives up when coming out. Coming out is very personal and someone shouldn't be forced to come out before they are ready. Coming out should happen, but only when the individual is ready.
- 00:45:49 *Question:* You became more politicized. *Answer:* JF became more political in the anti-war movement, more so than with the gay rights movement. JF was very active and militant in the anti-war movement.
- 00:47:38 *Question:* You must have dealt with Black militants. *Answer:* JF believed that every gay person identifies with the underdog. The gays often identified with Blacks

- because they're both underdog, oppressed groups.
- 00:49:26 *Question:* Is that in the past now? Even the Hoover Complex? *Answer:* No, but it's changed. There are Conservative Republicans coming out as gay.
- 00:50:59 *Question:* What about the budding women's movement? *Answer:* "The personal became the political" was the key to the women's movement and every movement. "You couldn't have had gay liberation without the women's movement." The women's movement opened doors for the gay rights movement.
- 00:51:57 *Question:* Was it reciprocated? *Answer:* Not always, but in some ways. The women's movement was led by many women who were homosexual, whether they knew beforehand or after the women's movement. Gay Liberation came directly out of the women's rights movement.
- 00:52:47 *Question:* By the mid-sixties, the Blacks were taking over your own struggle. *Answer:* JF mentioned the importance of the Black Power and Black Militant groups and their impact on other movements that dealt with identity.
- 00:53:19 *Question:* In 1968, how did you get involved in the strike at Columbia University. *Answer:* JF and the others all knew each other, so it was natural that he joined the strike. They had a radio show together. They showed up at every opportunity to protest.
- 00:55:09 *Question:* Why would it become less and less so (in reference to being involved in the art scene)? *Answer:* JF was becoming more political; being political and acting would get you blacklisted. JF continued to talk about the Columbia University strike and the significance.
- 00:56:28 *Question:* A lot of people thought that a revolution was coming in 1968. Did you believe that? *Answer:* JF believed that there was going to be a revolution. The Vietnamese and the Americans were serious about the war ending, along with an increase in drug use across the country.
- 00:57:00 *Question:* You became part of the yippies, right? And then you dropped out? What were the circumstances? *Answer:* It had to do with strategy of Chicago. JF was against the violence of the protest. JF believed that when "people, given enough information, make the correct choices."
- 00:58:34 *Question:* You must have been more turned off by the late sixties because of the violence? For example, the Weathermen. *Answer:* JF supported the Weathermen because the violence was against property and not against people.

- 00:58:49 *Question:* Isn't that a fine distinction to make? *Answer:* JF didn't agree with it being a fine line.
- 00:59:45 *Question:* So you are still dedicated to non-violence? *Answer:* JF thought that question required a definition for violence and non-violence, but JF did not agree with terrorism-like violence if it does not have a point. JF went on to discuss the merits of property violence. JF then discussed who and what influenced him politically. JF felt strongly about movements that raised self-consciousness like the women's movement.
- 01:03:21 *Question:* This was after Stonewall? *Answer:* Yes, JF discussed Stonewall and his coincidental presence there and how he called everyone and no one showed up to the riot.
- 01:04:28 *Question:* You called Abbie? *Answer:* Yes, JF called everyone.
- 01:04:35 *Question:* They sympathized with you, but they didn't support you? *Answer:* It was not sympathy; they just didn't think it was important. JF said that some claimed to have shown up, but they really didn't. Stonewall led to JF becoming a leader of the gay liberation movement.
- 01:04:58 *Question:* Did you realize what an important watershed Stonewall was at the time? *Answer:* Yes. JF saw that ordinary people were doing almost heroic acts, like having a spontaneous uprising. After Stonewall, a number of people JF knew in the New Left came out as gay.
- 01:06:45 *Question:* Did you join the Gay Liberation Front? *Answer:* JF was one of the founders of the Gay Liberation Front.
- 01:06:48 *Question:* There were five of you and you just met? *Answer:* JF and some of the other leaders happened to be at a community meeting together and started talking about what they wanted, that's how they created the GLF. The Gay Liberation Front was created because they didn't want to follow the Homophile Movement. The GLF was a co-gender movement from the beginning. It also had a high number of Jewish and Roman Catholic members.
- 01:07:50 *Question:* And you had all of that experience that you could bring to the organization. There's not much written about the Gay Liberation Front, does that bother you? *Answer:* Yes, it's never mentioned in the books on the classics of sixties movements. JF met a director who said there weren't any gay liberation groups in California.

- 01:10:04 *Question:* That just shows how behind gay liberation is behind all the other movements. *Answer:* JF discussed the slow growth of the movement, but is content enough that it is growing. JF seemed frustrated by the slow growth, however, especially since he could not find an answer for how to fix it.
- 01:12:57 *Question:* How important is the gays in the military issue to the gay community? *Answer:* The issue helps the gay community, but JF said he was anti-military, so it took him a long time to get behind it. "If you believe in equality, then you have to buy the whole package," told to JF by a woman in charge of the gays in the military movement.
- 01:14:54 *Question:* Gays are not fighting on the issue. Heterosexuals are doing it for you. *Answer:* Gay people are not debating the issue. JF believed in coalition politics and didn't attack the non-gay person talking about the issues. The handling of the issue disturbed JF. JF was more concerned with domestic partnerships and their rights. It's a better issue for building a coalition because it matters to heterosexuals and homosexuals.
- 01:15:45 *Question:* They're talking about having a civil rights movement dealing with domestic partnerships. *Answer:* JF said they've been working on that for twenty years and that people are moving away from the military issue. JF said many people were coming out at that point and that society was accepting homosexuality. JF and RC discussed Janet Reno.
- 01:20:25 *Question:* It's a very reactionary period with all the grass-roots movements to limit gays. *Answer:* JF said that it was the most exciting time of his life.
- 01:20:41 *Question:* Is it like the civil rights movement? *Answer:* Yes. JF said that they had to put AIDS into the picture. The children of the 1990s could be out without fear; they didn't have to fight to be out because of JF's generation.
- 01:23:17 *Question:* It's also a dangerous time. If you don't fight for your rights, then it could backslide. *Answer:* JF said that there is no guarantee that things won't get back again.
- 01:23:49 *Question:* Someone said that the defining issue of the 1990s will be gays and not abortion. *Answer:* JF said that "they" have always used the gays for fundraising. JF said that it's all about visibility; and the gays of the 1990s were very visible and out. JF started to discuss the Vietnam War and its social impact.
- 01:25:09 *Question:* What happened to you after Stonewall and the Weathermen? *Answer:* In the early seventies, JF was in the Gay Liberation collectives in New York and then in San Francisco. JF and his group did 72 conventions, radio shows, and other

- community activities.
- 01:28:16 *Question:* You had access. *Answer:* Yes, JF said that they got the message out. The GLF decided not to go underground. JF got Hepatitis in 1974 or 75 and then returned to New York, moved to Hollywood after that and got blacklisted there, went back to New York and got involved in working at nightclubs.
- 01:30:29 *Question:* Were you still political? *Answer:* Yes, but the GLF fell apart in the late 1970s until AIDS. JF started one of the first AIDS organizations in 1982. JF saw AIDS as something to revitalize the Gay Liberation Front. It set the stage for radicalism.
- 01:35:29 *Question:* Has the government's indifference changed since the introduction of AIDS? *Answer:* They have had to respond because of the vitality of the AIDS movement. JF said Bob Rafsky was the best kind of radical. JF talked about HIV and AIDS medication, didn't believe in the HIV theory.
- 01:37:00 *Question:* It has had an effect on the gay lifestyle, right? *Answer:* It had an effect on everyone, gays and straights. Sex became a big thing and more complicated in the 1990s.
- 01:39:22 *Question:* Maybe people can like you because of who you are. Sexual preference is like skin color. *Answer:* JF agreed, but didn't want to compare the two because skin color comes with different problems within the African American community because of misogyny and homophobia.
- 01:40:11 *Question:* Isn't it important for gays to come out? Isn't it important for people to get to know each other and become familiar with one another? *Answer:* It is critical, but it is not about outing. If everyone gets to know each other, then there isn't a reason for homophobia. JF talked about how things that are unfamiliar or foreign are frightening to people.
- 01:45:57 *Question:* You said it's an exciting time for gay liberation. You never established that for the sixties. *Answer:* JF said that the 90s were going to be everything that the 60s were not. The children with parents who grew up in the 60s will have learned from the mistakes of their parents. JF had high hopes for the 1990s.
- 01:48:07 *Question:* But you're optimistic that it's going to change for the better? *Answer:* Yes, but it may not turn out that way. JF said that the country was in a difficult time, but it will never be the way it was before. The country-the world had already changed its views of gay.
- 01:52:02 *Question:* **[beginning of question cut off]** When he came out in support. *Answer:*

JF answered that it kept hope alive in him that change was possible. The discussion was about the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton. JF spoke at a Panther rally for Bobby Seale and went against the White radicals who disapproved of him speaking

- 01:53:15 *Question:* What kind of reaction did you get from the audience? *Answer:* Silence and boos, but it didn't matter. It was done and they just had to deal with it.
- 01:53:32 *Question:* Bring it out in the open. *Answer:* Yeah. It was Dwight McDonald and the Black Panthers who pushed it through. JF and RC then spoke about the White Panther Party, John Lennon and Yoko, and the speech JF gave about getting Lennon out of jail. JF went on to say that he was not included in the movie about John Lennon because of his homosexuality.
- 01:55:03 **[no question]** JF spoke of how lesbians and gays were a vital part of the New Left.
- 01:55:18 *Question:* That whole aspect, not just you? *Answer:* JF admitted to just being an example because he happened to be very visible. There were other gay activists, like Carl Whitman, who did great things for the New Left.
- 01:56:04 *Question:* The sixties history will have to be revised. *Answer:* JF continued speaking about how many of the gay activists were forgotten. JF called them "disposable heroes".
- 01:57:18 ***End of Interview***