

INTERVIEW BY  
ATHENA DOURIS

# Leslie Feinberg

**W**hen Leslie Feinberg, author of the award-winning *Stone Butch Blues* and *Transgender Warriors*, fell ill recently with endocarditis, doctors failed to make a correct diagnosis for 12 months. An emergency room physician ordered Feinberg to leave, claiming his fever was so high because s/he was "a very troubled person." It's a chilling irony that one of the leaders of the transgender movement in this country was denied proper medical care—and nearly died—because of transphobia, the fear and hatred of transgendered people that s/he has dedicated his life to eradicating.

Feinberg and his activist peers have transformed the landscape of current queer politics: they have introduced "trans" (even into the mission statement of the National Organization for Women) as an umbrella term for transgender and transsexual persons. "Transgender" refers to any person whose gender expression appears at odds with his or her biological sex, including transvestites, drag queens and kings, intersexed persons, "passing" men and women, feminine men, and masculine women. "Transsexual" refers to men and women who challenge the sex they were assigned at birth, whether they choose sex-reassignment surgery or not. Feminism popularized the distinction between "sex" (as biological sex) and "gender" (as the social expression of masculinity, androgyny, and femininity); the trans movement took this distinction to the streets.

Feinberg discusses her struggle with the health care system in his new book, *Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue*. Released in October, *Trans Liberation* chronicles Feinberg's career as a public speaker and collects the addresses s/he delivered to a variety of groups, from Gay Pride organizers to straight male transvestites. We spoke with Feinberg about why sexual freedom is impossible without freedom of gender expression.

**On Our Backs:** *Trans Liberation* was released this fall. Can you tell us about what you're working on now?

**Feinberg:** I'm deep into a novel titled *Drag King Dreams*. It's about a working-class, Jewish trans person who has a foot in both the diverse trans communities and also the lesbian, gay, and bi communities. It's a book about figuring out what "home" means and who your people are. I'm also trying to write a fable titled "Tale of Two Hearts." It's really a love song to Minnie Bruce Pratt—my wife, my lover, and my friend. It's just one chorus of the love song I write to Minnie Bruce every day of my life.

**On Our Backs:** Your relationship with poet Minnie Bruce Pratt, thanks in part to her book *S/he*, is well known. What is your advice to those of us seeking a long term relationship as loving as yours?

**Feinberg:** I just know that for me, this is a relationship unlike any other I've ever had. I wasn't looking for a lifetime commitment when I met Minnie Bruce. I'd been dating nonmonogamously for quite a while, nothing serious.

Minnie Bruce and I both did a lot of work individually to grow up, get sober, and work hard at developing our political consciousness and activism. We were ready for each other. Ready to be loving, to communicate, and to listen.

**On Our Backs:** Pat Califia once wrote that she wishes there would come a time when we don't pick a sexual partner by his or her gender, but by other criteria, such as whether the person is a top or a bottom. In your ideal world, what would attract people to one another?

**Feinberg:** It's hard for me to hypothesize. In the world we live in, individuals do organize their preferences around gender expression. But a spectrum of sexuality existed in ancient societies that predated state-sponsored repression of human love. That leads me to think that these preferences might continue to exist in future societies in which no form of sex or gender is outlawed or demeaned.

I don't think the problem today is preferences so much as prejudices. For example, I read personal ads in which people say "no druggies or butches need apply." Wow! That's prejudice. If you say in an ad that you're looking for someone feminine or androgynous or some other form of preference, that's very different from saying "no butches."

As more and more prejudices are defeated, and in a world freed from divide-and-rule bigotry, people will be freer to explore their preferences about gender and about individuals.

**On Our Backs:** Do transgendered persons have sexual representation—pornography, erotic fiction, videos—made for and by themselves?

**Feinberg:** Right now, there are many people trying to write erotica that bends gender. And I think it's very important. For many of us, it's very hard, never being able to identify with the sexuality we see everywhere in the dominant culture. [So] it was very important for me to write about sexuality in *Stone Butch Blues*. In the novel I'm working on now, I've been thinking a lot about how to write about sexuality that's not necessarily masculine or feminine, or gay or straight.

**On Our Backs:** What do you mean by "sexuality that's not necessarily masculine or feminine"?

**Feinberg:** I see masculinity and femininity as forms of gender expression. But a person's gender expression doesn't necessarily determine their sexuality. It doesn't determine whether you'll be attracted to someone of a similar gender expression or a dissimilar one. It doesn't mean you'll be sexually aggressive or submissive or both.

That's what makes me so angry when I hear people derisively refer to someone as "thinks she's so butch but she rolls over in bed." It's an assumption that masculinity translates into being a top sexually. It limits the range of sexual expression of masculine females. And it's a sexual attack on someone who is, by virtue of their social oppression, already sexually wounded.

**On Our Backs:** Both sex scenes from *Stone Butch Blues* were excerpted for collections of lesbian erotica. Did you intend the scenes to be sexually arousing for readers—to be erotica—when you wrote them?

**Feinberg:** That's such an interesting question. I have to say that when I set out to write the sex scenes, I began to be aware of internalized censorship: "Can I or should I write about this or that?" So I consciously blocked out any thought of readers with this odd mental trick: I told myself that whatever I wrote, I didn't have to publish it. First write it, then decide. By doing that, I discovered that I could write about the kind of sex that I thought was true to the emotional makeup of the

characters. If it was erotic for readers, I think it was because I was true to the characters themselves, so the sex was "real," if you know what I mean.

**On Our Backs:** Can sexuality exist without gender? Or is gender an essential component of sexuality?

**Feinberg:** Certainly everyone is gendered—quite complexly. And we infuse much of who we are, as gendered people, into our sexuality. But sexuality is so complicated by oppression right now that it's really hard to study it removed from its social soil. Jesse Helms defeated funding for a study that would have backed up much of what Kinsey revealed decades ago: that human sexuality is not two opposite poles—one normal, one not. Sexuality is on a spectrum, and many individuals move along that continuum during their lives. But lesbian, gay, and bisexual love is outlawed in the majority of states in the United States. So how can a truly objective, intensive study of sexuality even be conducted? It's like doing a study on religious beliefs and affiliations during the Nazi regime in Germany.

So much of what we will learn about the relationship of gender and desire, as well as unraveling other questions about the matrix of sexuality, will be tied to the victories of our liberation of humanity from oppression altogether.

**On Our Backs:** In *Trans Liberation* you wrote about how frustrating it is voting for a two-party system when both parties are backed by big business. Do you vote? Should poor, queer, and trans people even bother voting?

**Feinberg:** Well, politics is about more than voting. It's also about finding ways to move people to action. In a particular situation, voting on an issue in an election or a candidate could help advance the movement. In general, though, I don't think voting for Republicans or Democrats—both supported by wings of corporate America, as are their parties—advances our struggle. I believe we need to build an independent liberation movement that's not tied down by waiting to see what happens in the next election. Everything our movement has ever won, including progressive legislation, has been won based on the strength of our struggle.

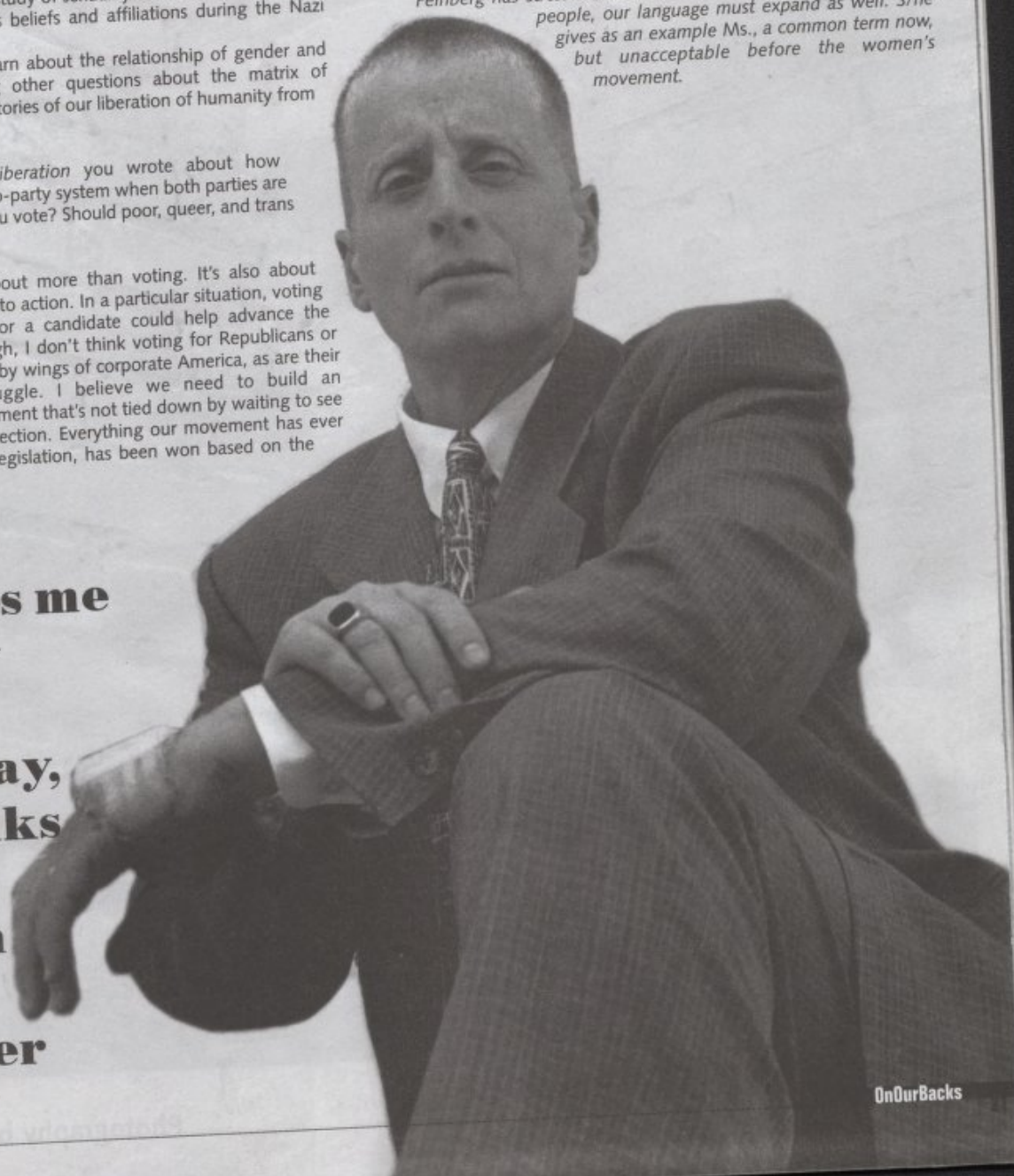
**"It makes me so angry when people say, 'she thinks she's so butch but she rolls over in bed.'"**

**On Our Backs:** Lesbians who accept transgender liberation in theory often balk at making alliances with transsexuals. Why is this so?

**Feinberg:** First and foremost, transsexual men and women helped build the modern lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities and movement. I know of at least one transsexual sister who fought the cops at Stonewall. They haven't always been recognized for their valuable contributions.

But I believe strongly that those in the lesbian communities who are opposed to building coalitions with the diverse trans communities are just one current, and very often a minority current. The question is: Which current of any movement will lead? Those who seek to narrow the movement, or those who seek to broaden and strengthen its collective power? ☺

*"In this interview, On Our Backs refers to Feinberg with the pronouns "hir" (pronounced "here") and "s/he." We choose to do so because Feinberg has stressed that if society is to accept transgendered people, our language must expand as well. S/he gives as an example Ms., a common term now, but unacceptable before the women's movement.*



PHOTOGRAPH BY MARILYN HUMPHRIES