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BY MARK RHYNDSBURGER

Is no. Tears already? The mixed chorus S.F. Lesbian and Gay Men's Community Chorus is living the United boarding gate at SFO, killing us softly with "Some-where" from West Side Story. It's delightful. Also: No foreplay could do the same. Inside the airplane, a DC-10, the flight attendants are in a tizzy—too many queeres and too many garment bags. (We go to know a lot about flight attendants. They, too, have their dreadful mornings, but they are easily charmed.) Everything stowed away, with three minutes to departure, we sing for Channel 4 news: "Echoes of Gladness" (indecently referred to, by some, as "Lift Up Your Scrotums"). And then, accelerat- ing down the runway to a rousing and unpromenated offering of "San Francisco"—our musical amulet—we're off.

When does the tour begin? Also. Do not be fooled by the apparent simplicity of this question. Some would say it begins the moment of take-off. Some would say it began last year as an embryo in the minds of a few chorus visionaries. I'll suggest another moment, no better or worse. Tuesday night at the Warfield Theatre in San Francisco, two days before departure. It's our kickoff concert, and no matter how good you are, opening night is still giving birth and dying rolled into one. But we get through it, and as the curtain closes for the final time the nearest rows of the audience get to hear something not in the program: a great, spontaneous cheer rising behind the front row. Thrust and glorious, un- bidden and untranslatable. That's zero hour, for me.

First stop, Dallas. We wait in over the Oklahoma border in the gathering dusk, descending among benign thunderheads. How good to see a thunderhead again! California may be hazardous to your perspective—at any rate, too much time spent in that clockwork climate. The pilot reminds us that Dallas-Fort Worth Regional Airport is larger than Manhattan island. A Texas-size bite of the future, I reckon, it's absurd out there, still giving birth and dying rolled into one. We get through it, and as the curtain closes for the final time, the nearest rows of the audience get to hear something not in the program: a great, spontaneous cheer rising behind the front row. Thrust and glorious, un-bidden and untranslatable. That's zero hour, for me.

Texas hospitality sets the tone for first night away from home. The Turtle Creek Chorus, our counterpart in Dallas, has arranged a pool party at a member's home in Highland Park, and it's a lavish spread: home-smoked beef and turkey, caviar, cheese, ham and melon, wine punch. The pool is hard to resist, and soon it's thresholding with 50 or more choristers from both camps, an aquatic cruise boat. Or maybe it's soldiers on leave, a USO with a difference. We can't make babies with each other and we can't recruit, but we can splash in each other's gene pool. I guess. San Francisco, meet Dallas. Before long our boys appear doing the water ballet ("Tea"—kick—"for two"—splash, etc. It's tasty but hilarious). Try to picture an anthropologi-
gist taking all of this in. Lester, ir- sporadic, and doing gorgeous dives—at 6'9", a large and graceful water sprite. After- wards, the men of the TCC ferry us to the bars of our choice—country dancing at the Round Up, disco at Alcatraz, after-hours at Sundance, something for everyone—and back to the Ramada Inn in godforsaken Mesquite. Their dedication to us for the evening is unflagging.

At the concert Sunday evening we're greeted with our first setbacks. The pro- grams have not arrived by freight, both Dallas dailies have refused to run our ads, and there is no marquee to announce us at the Convention Center. Attendance is disappointing: about 600 in an 1800-seat hall. But the pilgrims who come are extraordinary—vociferously enthusiastic, even a little rebel- rowdy, but raptly silent during the music (short, an ideal audience). They give us 11 standing ovations, and three encores are hardly enough. I scarcely feel that I've seen Dallas on this visit, and we're in no hurry to retire so soon after our first triumph, but de- parture is set for the crack of dawn. So, into the buses and back home to Mes- quite. Where is Mesquite, you ask? Well, it may be suburban by Dallas standards, but all I know is, the nearest freeway signs say Shreveport and Texarkana, neither of which is entirely in Texas. In the morning we sail through Big D. and out the other side to the airport, which is halfway to New Mexico. What a state.

It's enough to swell your head. I know, but our reception in Minneapolis Mon- day evening is no less enthusiastic than in Dallas. Here the orchestra section of the hall has been converted to tables and chairs for "Pop," and the mood is festive. We give our best performance to date. Tears trickle during "We Kiss in a Shadow," as usual, and we surprise our- selves with a tight, fast rendition of "Brand New Day." Sean steals the Lolli- pop Guild's "Bye, Bye Blues" as usual, and his rapport with the audience electric. Or- chestra Hall (1974) proves to be the superlative performing space of the tour. The hall can be tuned by large protrud- ing ducts that open onto an outdoor fountain and plaza. The sound inside is incredibly alive. Exhusted conductors are in evidence on the walls of the Green Room: Mitropoulos, Ormandy, Dorati, Skrowaczewski, and now, Marriner—a formidable list.

Walking through Minneapolis to our "afterglow" party at Casablanca, we see a clean and progressive downtown. Nicol- led Mall is attractively laid out, with Die Meistersinger resounding from every bus shelter for the edification of pedestrians; the IDS tower is cool and stupendous in the moonlight. The party and buffet are uptight from the Gay Nineties, a very visible gay bar right on busy Hennepin Avenue, and every room in the bar is packed. The Twin Cities Men's Chorus are our hosts; as in Dallas, the word "gay" does not appear in their name. Steve, 41, says he first knew he was gay in 1953 and never dreamed he'd see the day a gay group would be performing in Orchestra Hall. George, who is not no- tecesly drunk but unbelievably sincere, puts my hand relentlessly and thanks

The ADVOCATE, August 30, 1981
American as Mom, baseball, the Jefferson Memorial—and female—and that’s not the champagne six o’clock wake-up calls. The pace starts in O’Hare in town."

People just have a predisposition marks that Minneap0lis is rcnllv a partv revelry. Out in an awful instant doesn’t dissipate remnants! One has forgotten Ziggy’s death at the hottest flight attendants, male as well night to O’Hare’. Coffee and sunglasses on wings. And what starts out as an in-full-blown routine at every take-off and every landing can set your watch by. In any case, no stewardess on flights with the chorus. "We lip-synch so that others may sing." There’s more to the heartland than meets the eye. Lincoln, we discover, was named “Most Livable City” in a study of the nation’s 100 largest population centers. Number one in a hundred. I ask Paul why he came here and he replies, “You can get away with a lot in Lincoln.” On Wednesday, our first free day, we unwind in Antelope Park—reveling in the sun, picnicking, playing frisbee, mingling with the natives. We could be any young men, anywhere, unless you listen closely. Mark says he could screw a tree—to which Jim pipes up, “Oh! Have you seen my male imitation?” I meet Stan from Kansas City, who is a peer and a sweetheart. Stan and I drive south over the rolling hills with a supply of Old-Style—along gravel roads, by cornfields, through hamlets with names like Hickman and Firth. We stop and get our somewhere in the stillness; from here, Stan says, "We can look clear into Kansas. We’re talking about Robbins and Vonnegut, but essentially about space and love—and for a magical, still afternoon, we feel the genius of the plains.

Departure morning is emotional; chorus members and Lincolnites are lingering in hugs all over the airport. It feels almost like leaving family. People are leaving last minute pounds of pie and plums. No one wants to leave. As the co-chairman of the Sponsor--it said, “We want to make sure that you never, never, never forget Lincoln.”

Overheard on the flight to Detroit, Foot-in-Mouth Department: (I’m listening on Jay’s headphones with my hand in his crutch. Next to him is a business--man.)

Businessman: "You, ah, do this for a living."

Jay: "No. The chorus is a voluntary or--organization."

Businessman: "What do you do for a living?"

Jay: "I’m a consultant to corporations on executive management."

Businessman: "Oh." Pause. "I didn’t think you people did that kind of thing."

Pause, "—and still had time to sing, I mean."

Detroit is an enigma of a city—large and difficult to get a handle on, with some of the diffused character of Los Angeles. Downtown is looking spartan, the Renaissance Center seen from downtown is as magnificent and unassailable as the Emerald City. As in L.A. and Atlanta, a single gleaming Portman crea--tion does wonders for the city center. Our audience in Detroit is rather a tough nut to crack. Ford Auditorium is only about half sold, and after ecstatic responses in every city so far, the cool audi--ance is puzzling. (A blonde woman tells me later, incredibly, that people are afraid of seeming provincial if they show too much enthusiasm.) The chorus, in any case, is tired, the rigors of the road are
beginning to tell. We sing well, but not, I think, with real presence; it's a lesson well learned in keeping the concentration focused. The Men About Town bring out the audience somewhat, as they invariably do, but not until the end of the program is the audience truly engaged.

But the dressy reception afterwards, in the Hotel Post-charron, is another matter. Many chorus members claim it's the best party of the tour, and Detroit men the friendliest. The gay community, for geographic reasons, is rather fragmented; this affair, a benefit for the Detroit Gay Caucus, has lured quite a bit of excitement. Again and again I hear the refrain, repeated in Lincoln and Minneapolis, "We never did anything organized before. The chorus's coming really brought the community together."

The crowd at the party gives rise to a troublesome question, however. Where, I wonder, did all these people spend the evening while we were singing to a half-empty hall? It's certainly encouraging that the mere prospect of our visit is enough to fill an empty hall! It's certainly encouraging that the audience, however, was not gratuitement troublant. Here, of the evening's selections and seducing stentorian voice, informing the audience to arrive. 'Stephen fills the hall with his beauty and the aura of the tour; the audience were not considered too trilling a matter. The question arises elsewhere, to be sure; every town, in the end, is a "party town." But now to the tour except Lincoln is the concert a sellout, and the chorus returns to San Francisco with a deficit in the vicinity of $50,000.

I talk with Tory, who is 47, divorced, and the father of four. Tory moved to Detroit from a small town near Battle Creek, Michigan. He and friends in a suburb of the city are members of a gay political and social group that goes by an absurd code name for fear of neighborhood recrimination. "Before I heard about the group, the only way I knew to make contact with other gays was in the parks. A few years ago I was arrested in a park for having sex and sentenced to five years in prison. My lawyer managed to have the charge reduced to a misdemeanor, but my wife divorced me anyhow. She knew I was gay but that was the last straw." I tell him that I, too, have been a member of the Gay Mecca, but the Big Apple is Music Mecca, and we're heading for the most critical ears of the tour. But the audience at the Bay Area Women's Quartet play with verve and authority in the three brass pieces. The Lilliiputian Guild give a splendid performance of the difficult number; and the entire program soars, especially in the love song of Germaine and Brahms. It's the midpoint of the tour, and, for the moment at least, ignorant amateurs, we're in love with the concert life, hooking onto the roar of the crowd and the allure of the road. The New York Times grants us an entirely favorable review, The ADVOCATE, August 20, 1981.

However brief, and we're in heaven.

But the integrity of the tour as a group adventure suffers a bit in the second week, primarily in New York and Boston. The tribal bonding we felt in previous cities is missing now that we have more free time to pursue our several predilections. So we scatter to the ends of Manhattan—some in search of the Classics; most not. Many attend events at Les Mouches, the Mine Shaft, the legendary Saint. Some go the Circle Line tourist route. Others head for particular bars in the West Village to celebrate the memory of awakenings in their early gay lives. I head for home, which is mid-town, and mother. Cathy and I have become good buddies since I came out, and there's no place I'd rather be in New York than with her. We get into the vodka Friday night and make a solemn pact never to grow up.

At Arthur and Sam's party in Chelsea I'm introduced to Sioux, who is an advertising genius, equally at home in San Francisco and New York. Sioux's conversation is always stimulating, occasionally revealing: "Gay people don't walk hand-in-hand in New York. You'd be crazy. Too many fag-bashers, too many kooks. You're better off in California." I'm obliged to consider how much gays in San Francisco take center stage in the media for granted. Perhaps gay is not so good in New York, a city with too many other things on its mind. And when a chorus contingent announces that they had a whole subway car to themselves, swinging from the suburbs on route to the party, I detect a certain wistfulness for the celebrity we enjoyed in San Francisco and Lincoln, the specialness, the love and attention of an entire community. In New York's steel- armored consciousness, after all, we scarcely make a dent.

But it's in Boston that we get our most critical review. It's momentarily sobering, but good medicine. The Globe's Richard Dyer is incisive and fair, and most of what he says we take to heart. ("We Kiss in a Shadow" is mawkish and self-pitying, but it is the one piece that taught us the meaning of pianissimo, and we've been known to tame wild audiences with it.) The aged East/West Coast animosity raises its head, I think: "...When is the last time you read a conductor's program biography praising his 'strong background of body consciousness'"? The final comment, however, is a bull's eye: "...There was evidence that the chorus needed to be more critical of its work than its public if it wants to become as important musically as it already is symbolically."

As for Boston itself, there's no being objective about it, since it's ex-loversville for me. Both of them are in the audience at the Opera House Tuesday night—a situation wrily referred to in L.A. as "Dos Equi." But Beantown is lovely in summer—even, as we experience it, under a stifling inversion layer, and even, yes, from the dicey Combat Zone hotels where we take up residence. (This gives Bobby, who turns up in the morning with a dollar-sized, orchid-hued hickey on his neck, the opportunity to say, "Wounded in the Combat Zone, dear?") We walk in Back Bay and find contentment in the shade of Pei's monuments, the Mother Church so cool and classical with its rose of 21 perfectly matched lindens. In the evening we sing at Buddies in return for half the door receipts (a generous deal), then move around the corner to Clams, an uncanny example of the look and ambiance
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of the L.A. saloon in downtown Boston. Some members of the chorus remark on the fragmented response by the gay community to our visit, which strikes me as having a seasonal cause. During the academic year there's no place more electric with brainpower and cultural vibrancy. The town, gay as well as straight, pretty much goes into hibernation in June or else checks out (or Protests) until things perk up for homecoming. The Kennedy Center concert is the big one; it alone promises to bestow irrevocable legitimacy upon the tour. And so, I think, does the Washington Star comes out in advance with a detailed feature article. The concert itself is reviewed live for KRON-TV news in San Francisco. And we get such an ecstatic review from the venerable Paul Hume of the Put I'm afraid people will think we paid him off. (No, Louise, "venerable" does not mean "prone to getting clipped.") The audience practically stampedes after "San Francisco!"—how could we have thought for a moment that it might be too charismatic?—and they linger in the lobby long afterward, talking in the extra BTUs I know we put out tonight. This particular audience would be an embarrassment to any hall. (And Kennedy Center needs it more than most, though the Concert Hall sound systems are excellent.) On the way home our cabdriver asks, "What went on in there?" I just took a guy from there to his hotel. The fare was $2.25 and he gave me a ten. I don't believe it!"

What goes on during the day on Thursday is the staff souls are strict by. The chorus sings on the west steps of the Capitol, the cameras whirl, and there it all is, recorded for posterity. Below us spreads this magnificent city of monuments, perfectly Gallic in design and embellishing in its vistas. Who does not love Washington for its visual delights? And what hardened cynic doesn't feel the tiniest tug of patriotism? We encounter considerable curiosity at the Capitol, and one lone Bible-thumper, before setting off on a pilgrimage to the Jefferson Memorial, reporters in tow. Many of us "love it," emotionally, at the Jefferson Memorial. There they are, those ringing words, engraved above us, and there is that handsome man of many talents, larger than life and looming in bronze. We join hands in a great circle around him and fill the dome with sound. "The God who gave us life gave us liberty at the same time," People rush in to see who is, bystanders inquire, and are moved; some of them weep. The Drill Team from Fort Myer, dutifully practicing outside, is obliged to stop and listen. Score one for the men's voices and resonant architecture. And then score another for Renaissance brass music and our four woman players. Bystanders are capt, the monument thrills with the sounds of Susato and Gabrih. This is the day to retain, I think, had you but one.

It needs to be said that the tour, while doing good things for the image of gay people, does not, given the itinerary chosen, test the country's tolerance for gay visibility. With the exception of Lincoln (which may be, as in other things, not general) our destinations are large, cosmopolitan cities with sizable gay communities; I think the average educated urban denizen of these places is quite ready to share our space. True, KRON TV in Lincoln did cancel an appearance by the Chamber Singers on its "Morning Show," and once, briefly, as we left the Jefferson Memorial, a soldier in the Drill Team broke rank and had to be restrained. Then there was the occasional dirty look at the airport, and the repeated failure of boarding personnel to get that word out when announcing that "The men's choral group won't be there." But there has been no real adversity, no nasty episode. And I sense an unevenness in the chorus with the lack of tangible resistance to the tour. What is disturbing is that in the absence of the real thing, a certain amount of fabricated homophobia begins to creep into the folklore of the tour: A report of ill-tempered but routine carry-on inspection in Dallas is inflated into a plan to restrict all checked baggage; accounts of mild pedestrian astonishment are parlayed into traffic-stopping scenes, with ourselves always in the spotlight. It
sounds harmless enough, but there is a troubling dissonance behind it, a subtle kind of self-poisoning. Surely it's hard to let go of anything as gratifying as marriage. But what if the country were ready for us? I wonder if we've prepared for the time, so fervently hoped for, when people just don't pay us any mind.

Christ, Mary, keep it light! Well, it's the homestretch, and we're up in the Friendly Skies, bounding back across the time zones. If there's one place we do get down, as a group, it's in the air. Queens are jigging and whispering and going in to the first-class toilets with shopping bags, or something's up. Suddenly Randy's on the loudspeaker with "Test beautiful girls and only nine dresses," and here they come down the aisles, sit up, dispensing bubble gum like gris-gris at Mardi Gran—Miss Dallas, Miss Minneapolis, Miss Lincoln, and all the rest. Who would have dreamed what you can do with United Airlines crockery, pillows, and blankets? I think we lose a few supporters on this one. United must think so, too, later on I notice flight attendants giving caricatures to the women on board, thanking them for being such "good sports." The madness reaches a crescendo: Out come the coloring books and the bubble-blowers, and the clamor for "Wings" is deafening. Who could resist the "accelerated development" theory, looking at these boys? But they're irresistibly lovable, and it comes out in little ways, on airplanes especially. Jim, ousted from his seat at departure, wandering down the aisle in his inevitable navy way, saying, "Bumped Queen?" Bob, sporting his prized United stewardess scarf like a totem—and wearing it, like Isadora Duncan, with uninterest. Mercurial David, in pursuit of the gullible pony, popping up with his camera like a puppet. Drug and Mark, the latest hibiscus, cuddled up together, fast asleep—but best of all, the face of the flight attendant when she sees them: the tender-erotic meaning of the right as it down in her eyes.

Seattle is not exactly anticlimactic; it's just that everything is downhill from Washington. Members of the Seattle and Portland Gay Men's Chorus greet us royally at the airport, and we're whisked off to our hotel, practically in the shadow of the Space Needle. The concert is at the Opera House, a mammoth and exciting hall, home of the illustrious annual Wagner Ring cycle. At intermission we are summoned backstage and told in hushed tones that there has been a bomb threat. It's not the first time for this hull; two previous threats, one for a Russian Dance troupe, turned out to be false. The chorus, by means of a group decision-process more like a communal embrace than an actual vote, elects to ignore the threat. Dick requests a moment of silent meditation, and we proceed with the concert, the audience unaware of the episode. Our Seattle hosts come onstage at the end with enormous bouquets of colored balloons, and we sing the final notes of the concert, and the tour, under a festive and brilliant canopy of color.

Sunday, June 21, 5 p.m.: Back on California soil, insane with joy, absolutely blinded on coming home, and climbing the walls with the urge to take a leak. We're still on the buses, perched like Apaches below the brow of the hill at Castro and 22nd. Then the signal is given and a phalanx of motorcycles roars over the hill, followed by four husky bands of men—veterans of the air, well-traveled, delicious, drunk, sometime singers who couldn't sing a straight note right now, probably, to save their lives. Out of the buses and into the arms of 1,000 ecstatic lovers and arrangers filling the street, some of us kissing the hollowed out ground at 18th and Castro, everyone lost to the amber of the moment. Tears and speeches, two Certificates of Honor from the Board of Supervisors— and later, the Key to the City from one of our most vigorous supporters, Mayor Feinstein. And how easily the meanings of the tour merge into one: We did it for us, for our gay community in this paradisiacal spot we call home, and for our gay community in every town in the country. What we do for them, for the rest of the nation, the startled bystanders in the airports, follows effortlessly from that: winning their hearts in a bloodless coup, with radiant self-respect.

[Contributions toward the reduction of the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus National Tour deficit will be gratefully accepted. Checks, payable to SFGMC/SGPDA, may be mailed to Golden Gate Performing Arts, P.O. Box 1665, S.F., CA 94114.]