The Buddy Line

A love song for a fallen fighter

March 1, 1997 By Jane Rosett

Too often people mark the beginning of AIDS activism with the founding of ACT UP. But by then, a generation of PWAs had already died fighting for their lives. David Summers, whose ashes were scattered long before the 1987 march on Wall Street, was a pioneering civil-disobedience warrior. In November 1985 in New York City, the blond 33-year-old cabaret singer became the first person to be arrested defending the rights of PWAs.

Earlier that year, David and a few other friends with AIDS asked me-a lesbian photographer AIDS activist-to help produce the first PWA newsletter, *The PWA Coalition Newsline*. Hysteria was then at its height. The New York City Department of Health had just closed the Mineshaft, a world-class gay sex club, and the *New York Post* had run “AIDS Den” headlines. The state health commissioner was advocating that cops invade hotel rooms to stop “high risk” sex.

When the city council announced it was holding hearings on resolutions to close commercial sex establishments. David was the token PWA invited to testify. As he arrived at City Hall, an angry crowd of homophobes was facing off with an angry crowd of homosexuals. David tried to enter the hearing but was blocked by a cop. When David explained he was scheduled to testify, the cop shoved him and yelled, “You aren’t going anywhere.” David pushed back and said, “You’re damn right I am.” For this he was handcuffed and arrested.

But this wasn’t David’s first time making a stink. The one that got the most attention was his AIDS poster-yboy appearance with visible Kaposi’s sarcoma earlier that year on *The Phil Donahue Show*. Afraid they might “catch” his disease, technicians refused to attach a microphone to David’s lapel. Ever the pragmatist, David waited until the cameras were rolling to vent his outrage. Donahue opened by wondering aloud if people with AIDS "still *really* face discrimination." Armed with his Texan charm, David stopped the show by recapping the mike incident. An embarassed Donahue cut to a commercial.

David was equally accomplished in the streets and in the sheets: He was a radical slut. His lover, Sal Licata, suggested David take a break from the Everard bathhouse and try the New York Jacks, Sal’s own favorite jerk-off club. In his *Newsline* sex column, David reviewed his newfound pastime: “To my surprise I had a great time; and also to my surprise, I was denied membership in the club. My having AIDS had nothing to do with it, according to the officers. It was my ’abrasive

personality.’ Yeah, sure!”

We were all pleasantly surprised David was still alive to celebrate his and Sal’s seventh anniversary in November 1986. Sal invited a few of us “to hang out in bed and hold David while he pukes.” Who could resist? It was a party. David held court and stressed how honoered he was to have lured a lesbian into his king-size bed. Sal joked that David always *did* entertain best in bed. Vito Russo, Don Knudson and I relayed the latest PWA dish. “More people are in love than in the hospital!” David cheered. Within a few days, David was dead, and within a few years, everyone else in David’s bed that day-except me-was also dead.

While waiting for the movers to empty David’s apartment, Sal sat at the piano and taught me the song “My Buddy,” which was co-opted as a code piano song by homosexuals in World War II: “Miss the touch, the touch of your hand, my buddy, my buddy. My buddy misses you.”

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