Why has Randy Shilts found such acceptance among straights and a non-stop firestorm of contention among other gay journalists? John Weir explores the writer, the ego, and the quest for posterity.

The view from Randy Shilts' San Francisco condo complex high above the Castro is the kind that tempts cinematographers and utopians. Blue sky and bridges and the bay and pastel-colored houses lining the brown hills shift in exhilarating perspective like a cubist painting. From this vantage point, it is possible (if sentimental) to picture Randy Martin Shilts, Midwestern Methodist, arriving in the fall of 1975 with a journalism degree in his pocket and a head of shaggy hair. A 24-year-old still in bell-bottoms, he is a hippie, an idealist, a nascent Northern Californian, a Leo with Aries rising and his moon in Libra, a college boy, a reporter for an emerging national gay newspaper called The Advocate, and like many of the men and women who migrated to the Bay Area at the rate of 5,000 a year during the mid 1970s, a self-identified homosexual.

Shilts would later refer to the next five years of his life in San Francisco as a "dream." During our interview in his apartment, he tells me, "The 1970s were a very noble social experiment, the first time we created a community that was our community. It was a very exciting time for me and I'm really happy I was part of it. Even though there's an obvious biological downside to being from that era." Shilts laughs when he says this, lying on his living room couch with a tube.

John Weir wrote The Irreversible Decline of Eddie Socket, a novel, and has contributed to Details and The Advocate.

Photograph by Christine Alicino
While Shilts maintains that he doesn’t understand the younger gay and lesbian community,

for breathing and a pillow between his knees to compensate for the padding he lost during a recent bout with Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia. He is unsentimental about his illness, which he has anticipated, he says, since he tested HIV positive on March 16, 1987, the day he finished writing his second book, the best-selling AIDS chronicle And The Band Played On. The book made him famous, which accounts for his subjection to moments like this, when the intimacy of his breathing deliberately rather than unconsciously is something he has to share with a stranger with a tape recorder in his living room, first thing Sunday morning.

But despite being short of breath, he is comfortable talking, as long as he sticks to the facts. For instance, he didn’t get really sick until last December. “My lung collapsed,” he says. Explaining the medical procedure he endured, he speaks in phrases punctuated by gasps, as if he were Alexandra Del Lago in Tennessee Williams’ Sweet Bird of Youth, a fierce and vulnerable diva. “They had to go in and staple the lung together. Then they sort of glue it to the inside of your chest.” While he talks, I watch his big, photogenic dog, a golden retriever named Dash, pace the floor. Dash seems to be constantly in danger of disconnecting Shilts’ breathing apparatus, which consists of a long tube that hooks around his ears, plugs into his nose, stretches across the floor, and disappears offstage into the bedroom, like a telephone extension cord. When Dash comes up to me with his ball, I try to keep him still by my side. “It’s healing,” Shilts is saying. “There’s still a lot of scar tissue. My lungs heal, they get better. You just have to wait for it all . . . to . . . come back,” he finishes, running out of breath. Then he laughs. “And patience is not my forte.”

No is defeat. There are many shades of irony to which Shilts is responsive—media consultant Ken Maley, a longtime friend, tells one story about how he and Shilts could not contain their laughter at an EST-like weekend retreat run by The Advocate in the late 1970s—but the unspeakable irony of his now living with AIDS is not among them. “I was so disappointed by Band’s inability to change things,” he says simply, apparently without anger. It is a statement of fact. That his current diagnosis is one of the things Band failed to change seems not to affect him. I had been told that Shilts was egotistical, but what impresses me about him most is his reckless self-disregard. He is concerned with his professional reputation but not much interested in his personal well-being. He has the courage and the authority of a man who is skilled at observing everything except himself.

What strikes others as arrogance may just be what Maley refers to affectionately as Shilts’ “spunk.” “Randy had this way of being able to say things that just totally pissed people off,” he says. “He had such a brusque edge to him that people so easily misunderstood.” Among those people were some of his peers in the gay and lesbian community. For while Shilts has earned the respect of straight journalists, many of his gay and lesbian colleagues continue to regard him with suspicion, if not hostility. This points to a peculiarity of the gay and lesbian community: Since its openly gay members have traditionally had limited access to film, television, and politics, its most visible leaders have often been writers. And Shilts’ colleagues, fellow gay and lesbian journalists and writers, have closely monitored his writing and his public pronouncements since his crossover into the mainstream in 1981, when he became the first openly gay reporter ever hired by the San Francisco Chronicle. Many of those watching have been the men controlling the gay press who also might have successfully worked and advanced in the mainstream if they’d remained in the closet.

The past few months have constituted a veritable festival for Shilts watchers, like the birthday party he throws for himself every August at his weekend home on Northern California’s Russian River, an event he blithely dubs “Shiltsmas.” His name has been associated recently with several of the issues and projects that define the heralded emergence of gay and lesbian visibility in the so-called Year of the Queer. The HBO adaptation of And The Band Played On, debuting September 11 (see "A Boy in The Band," page 48), has been the subject of discussion about homophobia in the television industry, given the repeated gossip about the way the TV movie handles the story’s gay characters and the Reagan administration’s AIDS policies. (It’s unclear how much control Shilts eventually had over the adaptation.) At the same time, The Mayor of Castro Street, his first book, is the center of an ongoing struggle to produce a big-budget Hollywood film about a homosexual who is neither a sex-crazed silly nor a homo-cidal lonelyheart—assassinated San Francisco supervisor Harvey Milk. As the Milk project languished early this summer after the departure of director Gus Van Sant, Shilts announced the sale to HBO of rights to his current New York Times bestseller about lesbians and gay men in the military, Conduct Unbecoming. The book’s April publication coincided with an unprecedented national and congressional debate about homosexuality in the armed forces.

So thorough is Shilts’ infiltration of what queer activist-author Michelangelo Signorile calls “the Trinity of the Closet”—New York print, broadcast, and publishing media, the Washington political machinery, and Hollywood’s entertainment monolith—that it may have seemed to media watchers at times this summer that Shilts was the only openly gay journalist working in America. He has certainly exhibited the most uncanny timing. Together, his three books address some of the most significant developments in the movement for homosexual rights over the past 15 years.

Yet Shilts has repeatedly complained to interviewers about his standing in the gay and lesbian community. “Basically, the only bad reviews I got for Band were in the gay community,” he says, “because it was all right for me to criticize Reagan and the blood banks, but it wasn’t all right to be straightforward about the gay community.” What Shilts means by “straightforward” is the heart of the controversy
still surrounding his depiction of gay male sexuality in Band and his role in closing the bathhouses in San Francisco in the early 1980s. As recently as last fall, editors of San Francisco's black-humor AIDS zine, Diseased Pariah News, published a comic strip depicting Shilts as a rejected bathhouse patron who announces, "If no one in the bathhouse will sleep with me, then no one in the bathhouse will sleep with anyone, ha!" And while Shilts maintains that he doesn't understand the younger gay and lesbian community—"I don't feel comfortable with the word 'queer,'" he says—evidently queer activists believe they understand him.

"No matter how high-sounding the rhetoric, outing makes some of the most august gay journalists and leaders look like a lot of bitchy queens on the set of Boys in the Band," Shilts wrote in an editorial condemning the practice of forcing certain people out of the closet, advocated by Sognolire and others. Versions of the piece ran in the San Francisco Chronicle and the Los Angeles Times in 1991. While many gays and lesbians may have agreed with Shilts, Rouillard reports in his book Queer in America that he found Shilts' remarks "reeked of self-loathing." Los Angeles Times Magazine senior editor Richard Rouillard, who was editor-in-chief of The Advocate when Shilts published his diatribe, calls Shilts' editorial "particularly vicious."

"I think he's a jerk," is what Shilts says unapologetically about Rouillard in an Advocate interview by current editor-in-chief Jeff Yarbrough. Rouillard in turn describes Shilts as "impossible to work with." When the Los Angeles Times was excerpting Conduct Unbecoming in its magazine last spring, Rouillard says, Shilts "wouldn't take my phone calls."

The conflict that animates their inventive and that is at the bottom of every controversy in which Shilts has been involved during the past 10 years has to do with what Shilts means when he says he is being "straightforward." It involves his central stylistic conceit as a mainstream journalist, which is his commitment to going "out of my way to get other people's sides of the story," to gather the facts, if not the objective truth. "I don't consider myself an activist or an advocacy journalist," he says. "I feel that prejudice in our society [against homosexuals] is born less out of malice than out of ignorance, and that if you just inform people... you can do more to erase prejudice than any other kind of action. Because [straight people] just don't know any better, they're just dumb, and they live in a society where we weren't talked about, where all these silly images of us exist, the fantasy images, really, and you try to replace that with some facts."

Shilts thereby reveals his deeply committed political outlook, in the midst of arguing that he does not express it professionally. He believes the way to justice is to replace lies with facts. In many instances, his fact-telling has been remarkably cogent, even psychologically and politically shattering, as in his account of the appalling treatment of gay and lesbians in the U.S. military in Conduct Unbecoming. And as his friend, openly gay former Los Angeles Times reporter Victor Zonana says of Shilts' achievement with Band, "It is because of Randy that the Reagan administration is not going to get away with what it did to us in the court of history."

But facts are subject to interpretation, which other gay and lesbian journalists feel that Shilts at times fails to recognize. Ironically, his own recounting of the facts has occasionally generated a new set of lies. Because his reporting has the impact of truth, many readers may have confused some of Shilts' attitudes about the gay and lesbian commu-
A Boy in The Band

THOUGHT YOU WERE GOING TO ASK ME MY FAVORITE COLOR," teases sexy actor Matthew Modine, star of Birdy and Married to the Mob and now HBO's And the Band Played On. No, Matthew, this isn't Sixteen magazine and we've got much more important things to discuss.

In Band, Modine portrays Dr. Don Francis, a crusader at the Centers for Disease Control—one of the "good guys" in a movie that Modine hopes "as ugly as it can be, showing the ignorance we're all capable of."

He has opposed any attempts to sanitize the movie's bathhouse scenes because, he tells me, "to pretend that there wasn't a lot of fucking going on would be a lie." (Monogamous gay relationships are represented too, he quickly adds.)

Modine grew up strongly influenced by his older hippie brothers, and his viewpoints have a definite 60s feel: open-minded, empathetic, wary of government and big business. A bonafide heterosexual (damn!), Modine is completely relaxed and intelligent talking about gay people.

"I know from my childhood that people suspected of being gay are bashed and taunted. You would just think that as we get older that that sort of schoolboy behavior ends. It never stops; people carry that all the way to their political positions, all the way to the White House, that kind of stupidity."

This isn't Modine's first attempt at an AIDS-themed project: The Ghost of the Green Monkey, an investigative story about the search for the AIDS virus, fell through. But when Band was languishing in preproduction hell, Modine's participation was crucial in getting the cameras rolling. His commitment to the AIDS cause is, well, tribal: "If we consider ourselves to be in tribes," he says, "and I'm in a theatrical tribe, my tribe has been decimated. Too many people than I care to count have died."

Modine was hoping to play the gay schoolteacher in a film version of The Object of My Affection, with Debra Winger as his roommate—until producers insisted the pair form a heteromance. And he'd love to portray Harvey Milk in a film adaptation of The Mayor of Castro Street, he tells me.

Soon after Band debuts on cable, Modine will again grace movie screens in Robert Altman's Short Cuts, opening in October, and Alan Rudolph's Equinox, in which he plays identical twins. "Like Patty Duke?" I ask. He laughs: "You had to say Patty Duke. You couldn't say Jeremy Irons." Well, Matthew, I guess Patty's more this girl's style.

Linda Simpson is the editor of My Comrade, New York's premier drag 'zine, and appears weekly on Manhattan Cable's Party Talk.

AIDS is a problem that has been chronicled by many authors, from the first reports to the latest developments. The book, in which Modine plays a significant role, is an example of how the disease can be portrayed on screen.

The book's apparent association of promiscuity exclusively with illness and death is another of Shilts' interpretive conclusions that may be confused with fact. Shilts' "doesn't make it clear that you can't have a healthy sex life in an unhealthy society," points out openly gay Nation editor Andrew Kopkind, who feels that Shilts' writing often lacks "a sociological framework" for its conclusions about gay male sexuality. And Shilts' conviction that the bathhouses were the wrong place to attempt to educate people about AIDS is certainly controversial. Rouillard calls Shilts' position on the bathhouses "a guilt-laden response rather than one that is carefully thought out." Even Shilts' attitude toward outing has the moral weight of fact. Perhaps this explains Yarbrough's surprise in the Advocate interview when Shilts appears to suggest for the first time that he is not wholly opposed to outing in all situations, and in fact would love to out the four-star general he wrote about in Conduct Unbecoming.

Shilts' contribution to the word and lesbian community as an openly gay reporter with heterosexual sanction is ironically what most aggravates his peers. He has suggested that mistrust of him among homosexual writers and intellectuals may be literary jealousy. Perhaps he is right. The fear that the straight community will listen only to a limited number of homosexual voices may be endemic among gay and lesbian writers. But what is remarkable about Shilts' career is that his dedication to replacing prejudice with fact is both his singular innovation in gay and lesbian journalism and the source of his alienation from homosexual activists, writers, and politicians. Though he is not above hurling the kind "ad hominem" attacks he deplores from other people. As when he called San Francisco queer activists "lavender fascists" for publicly torching copies of the San Francisco Sentinel, the local gay paper whose editorial policy they opposed, his deepest commitment is to journalistic professionalism. "I don't think anybody's objective, but you can be fair," he says.

"Randy was always a journalist," Maley says, remembering their meeting in 1976 at the home of then reigning San Francisco gay activist Jim Foster, who advocated strict accommodation to the straight community. Describing himself and Shilts as "radical fags" who were followers of the insurgent politico Harvey Milk, Maley says, "we were allowed to be part of things [with Foster's gang] as long as we didn't rock the boat too much." Shilts was a reporter for The Advocate, where he maintained a professional remove from everything he covered.

After all, he was the only openly gay student to graduate from the University of Oregon's journalism school in 1975. Unlike Rouillard, who was a society and entertainment editor for the Los Angeles Herald Examiner before moving to The Advocate, and Signorile, whose background as a journalist included planting tidbits in gossip columns, Shilts has always

nity with fact. This is the occupational hazard of the non-confessional journalistic mode, and it constitutes what Rouillard calls the "objectivity closet." An example is Shilts' depiction of Gaetan Dugas in Band as the Typhoid Mary of AIDS, whom the medical community labeled "Patient Zero." Shilts seems to blame Dugas for spreading AIDS throughout North America. This is not fact but conjecture. "What is now called AIDS was first seen in middle-class gay men in America in part because of our access to medical care," asserts activist-author Douglas Crimp, suggesting in a 1987 article in October magazine that AIDS may have existed among IV drug users throughout the 1970s.

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worked as a news reporter. He remains almost religiously faithful to traditional newsroom practices—the worst thing he could think to say about Signorile's 1991 outing of then Pentagon spokesman Pete Williams was that he didn't have "a standard of proof" for the revelation. (This accusation may be disingenuous, given Signorile's careful accumulation of sources.) Expressions like "standard of proof" and "conflict of interest" are part of the stock-in-trade of journalists like Shilts, whose attitude of high seriousness suffuses everything he writes. That he may at times appear to be hiding behind his scruples is an accusation leveled at many reporters who righteously advocate objective journalism.

This was not so remarkable at journalism school or at the San Francisco Chronicle, but at gay papers like The Advocate, Shilts' level of seriousness and professionalism was rare. He was not going to be contained in the era's sometimes flip and hesitant gay journalistic ghetto. He always acted with what his boss at the time, Advocate editor-in-chief John Preston, calls "the security of the successful professional. It's part of what the straight community responds to in him."

And what the gay and lesbian community sometimes mistrusts. "His discomfort with who he was showed up in his writing," maintains Kim Corsaro, publisher of the gay San Francisco paper, the Bay Times. She cites a passage from Band that juxtaposes a scene at a gay bathhouse with a vignette in which a man carries his pencil-thin dying lover down the stairs from his apartment. "The equation of gay male sexuality with AIDS is something that I continue to find extremely offensive," she says. More importantly, she was responding to the objective, authoritative tone of Shilts' writing, which renders even his unconscious attitudes as apparent fact. And one of his significant personal biases is what Preston calls Shilts' "puritanicalism," the notion that there are drives that have to be cured. "Randi can't be understood without understanding his alcoholism," Preston says, describing Band and Shilts' position on the bathhouses as a response to 12-step philosophy.

According to Preston, as a recovering alcoholic, Shilts saw bathhouse owners as comparable to bar owners—merchants exploiting the compulsions of the gay male community. "He's one of the few people who talks in Band about alcohol and [sexual] risk taking," says Preston, who considers Band to be preeminently a book about learning not to take such risks. It is a text of recovery, with the moral thrust of a Puritan allegory like Pilgrim's Progress. With San Francisco as the Celestial City, Band offers characters representing qualities like Lust, Innocence, and Recovery, who one expects to wander out of the Vanity Fair, through the Slough of Despond, over the Delectable Mountains, and back to the Celestial City, spiritually redeemed. In fact, some of them nearly do. But the book remains stubbornly unredemptive because, of course, it is about AIDS, for which there is still no cure. For straight people unfamiliar with gay men, the book must seem reassuringly ominous. Striking the right tone of gloom and foreboding in reporting the havoc gay men wreak upon each other through their sexual desire.

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