Major Interview
by Susan Stryker

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in cooperation with the
Gay and Lesbian Historical Society of Northern California

and Joanne Meyerowitz
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Introduction

Major is a male-to-female transgendered person, born in 1942, who came out at 16 as a street queen in Chicago in the 1950s. She started taking hormones in 1958 to change her appearance. She was later a patient of Harry Benjamin's, tried repeatedly to get into the armed services, worked in the computer industry, and danced in the Jewel Box Revue for many years. She is currently providing transgender services at the Tenderloin AIDS Resource Center in San Francisco.

SS: How do you want to be identified on tape? Just as Major?

M: Just Major. I identify with both sexes, with both sets of feelings, but Major is just fine.

SS: So where do you want to start? What I know about you is basically what you were telling me at Tranny Fest back in November, that you had danced with the Jewel Box. So maybe if you could just tell me where you are from?

M: OK--a short history of me--I was born in Chicago, raised off and on in Chicago and New York.

SS: And when were you born, if it's OK to ask?

M: 1942--I'm fifty-five. I been draggin' and wearing my women's shit off and on since I was five years old. I would wear perfume because I thought it smelled good. Two instances of things that happened to me--it's the sort of thing that happens to most of us, getting raped, getting pushed into a corner and told that what I thought and saw was wrong, that kind of thing. I tried to get into the service in the '60s to go fight in the Vietnamese war but they wouldn't take me. I tried in three different cities, to butch it up and get in, but it never worked.

SS: Tell me a little bit about that, a little more.

M: It was difficult at first because I didn't believe in the war, but what I did believe in was in landing myself somewhere where there was nothing but guys. So I wanted to get in the service. I had heard from some queens that were in there, and they were doing pretty good. Had a decent lifestyle, had found some people who--well, you just knew who to be with, you know? There were the guys who wouldn't like you and the ones who did, and it was a relatively safe trip unless you crossed over a boundary, unless you crossed over a line. So that was pretty interesting. A lot

of my friend signed up--a lot of my straight friends from school, they went into the service. At the time I thought it would be kind of a cute and interesting thing to do. I just never got in.

SS: How did you get treated by the military when you went down and tried to get in?

M: It was odd, because they really didn't know my T. First I took the test, I tried to get in the Navy, and they said OK, and then I went down for my physical, and in the gym, where they did the physical, I did all the things, and then right at the end, the thing that they put you through, was that they had this gauntlet of guys. They had you line up, and the doctor went along grabbing your balls and telling you to cough. Well, I had never been in a room with so many beautiful boys in my life! So there I was standing in this line, and I kept saying to myself "Oh--don't you look, girl! Just keep your eyes forward. Don't do anything. Just be cool. Well, OK, one little peek. No one will see me with all these guys. Nobody would notice." So I leaned back and looked at this row of asses. Then I leaned back forward and this hand tapped me on the shoulder and asked me to come out. I got sent through this door and told to see this other guy, so I went in there and saw the guy and he told me that they could tell that I was inappropriate for the service and that they were going to give me a 4F, and that I was to get out of the building immediately. They already had my clothes in hand so I didn't even have to go back through to pick up my things. They just threw me out! Three years later I tried again, in--

SS: So when would this have been--'64, '65, '66?

M: This would have been, let's see, 1963.

SS: '63--wow, that was really early.

M: Yeah, we could just tell that stuff was coming down, and so I was trying to get in early. Then I tried again in 1966. First time I tried was in Chicago; the next time I tried was in New York. In New York I tried to get in the Air Force, because I had heard that was easier. And I had met a queen, another drag, who was actually in the Air Force, and she had convinced me that I could get in the Air Force. She didn't have any problems, and told me that she had a place where I could stay, and that we could drag on weekends, and that it would be a lot of fun. So I tried to get in. But they caught me again--I just couldn't get past that fucking physical.

SS: So you've started talking about the '60s now, but earlier--you said you started dragging at five years old?

M: Yeah, got into my mother's clothes early, as everybody does, but it didn't get serious for me until about 1958. I guess Christine Jorgensen had just been out that year, or maybe the year before.

SS: Well, actually it was a little earlier, in '52, '53, that she first broke.

M: Well, the news got me around '57, '58, because back in '52 I didn't know what was going on. Some friends of mine were talking about it, they were transitioning, and they had found this doctor that was giving them hormones.

SS: So where was this, Chicago?

M: Yeah, initially this was in Chicago.

SS: So how did you start meeting queens?

M: From after school, when I was in high school, when I would get out of school I would run through the gay areas and seek them out. There'd be two or three girls standing together, talking. Go-to-hell eyebrows, pink or red hair--and I would just go up to them and talk to them, and they would talk to me about being new and all. I got to know a couple of girls really well. When I could slip away in the evening, at night when my folks had gone to bed, I would go up to where they hustled. There were a lot of girls into drugs then, in the late 1950s. Heroin was really the popular drug. I smoked a lot of pot, too, in those days.

SS: So where were the gay areas in Chicago in the 1950s?

M: They were on the north side, and I lived on the south side. But it was the north side that was really happening. There was a section on the north side called Old Town, and that was where the beatnik generation hung out, and that was where what we call transsexuals today would have been. It was safer there. Queens had more access to things. But the gay bars were stuck all over. They had one or two on the south side, but those bars were predominantly black. And I've always chased white boys, so I was always up on north side, in and out of there, until I met a couple of drag queens who were doing shows, and they introduced me to a couple more who weren't doing shows but who were dragging, and who were outrageous even in the day time, which was a real big thing then. It was taboo to paint up and go out in the daytime. You could get killed for that. And through them they introduced me to the doctor they were getting their hormones from.

SS: Remember his name?

M: You know, I don't. But it was way up on the north side, near Riverview Park. It took us almost an hour to get there, to get to his office. And he was doing this because--as time has allowed me to find out--well, there was a good deal of money to be made. Because all the girls were running to him with cash, just straight-up cash. I paid him to start me on hormones, and he just put his hand on my chest, and said to breath in and breath out. And he told me that my heart sounded OK, and patted me on the back and said, "OK, so you want to be a woman?" And I said, "Yes, doctor, I want to be a woman." And Bingo! that was it. He shot me up. And when he took my money--I'll never forget this--he opened up this drawer and it was filled with cash. He had to push the money down to put my money in there, it was so full.

SS: Tell me a little more about Old Town and some of the queens you were meeting there. You said there were people walking the streets dressed, in the "50s? And what sorts of differences did you see between people who did shows and those who didn't?

M: Yeah, well, the differences then were more pronounced then than they are now, because now everybody crosses lines. The difference was, those that were more passable, they would go out to see the shows, or go out to straight clubs, and even try to date straight guys and not tell them

what their T was. The queens were, as always, as loud and obnoxious as it was humanly possible to be. They weren't as boisterous as they are now, though. There was a limit, and you knew how far to go. If somebody said something and you turned to read them, and they're looking at you--there was a limit to what you could do. But the thing was, once you got there, there were other girls to back you up and be with you. So that if you crossed that line, you had some back-up; your friends stood by you. Girls you didn't even know would come over if they happened to be in the area. And there was more of a sense of unspoken unity in the community at that time. And it was a comfortable feeling, because it was like, well, you knew you might get beat up but you probably weren't going to get murdered, because you had this force with you. Whereas if you were by yourself, depending on how you conducted yourself, you could get killed. That was a constant inevitability that we all lived with, that we all knew about, and that did happen from time to time. But mostly it was just fun, walking the street. It was just a new experience. It was like having a new outfit and it was Easter. Every night was a new night, and every night there was an Easter parade going down the street. And you would, depending and which clubs you could get into, how you were received, your times would just get better. Of course there were laws, and there were depressing periods, and periods of complete angst or anger, but the times in and of themselves were easier. Guys were more communicative with you then than they are now, that I have noticed. And the feel of things was different.

SS: How so?

M: Well then it was exciting, not just because it was new--because it could have been something that wasn't new, especially for the older queens, who were in that period. But we had the balls then, where we could go out and dress up. You got rewarded for that, and had a really great time. You had to keep your eyes open, had to watch your back, but you learned how to deal with that, and how to relax in it, and how to have a good time. I don't think girls today have that awareness of things. It seems to have died, a lot of the feelings and stuff. Because at least if you enjoy where you are going it was a pleasure, a wonder--even with the confusion. We didn't know at the time that we were questioning our gender. We just knew that this felt right. There wasn't all this terminology, all this labeling--you know what I mean? There was this thing that "If it feels right, you should probably do it." Enjoy it. I find that a lot of the younger girls today, people that I meet, have this feeling that this is something that they have to do, and that if they do it their life will be better, but not that they really enjoy it--that every day is not a marvel. Even with the all the stuff that happens outside, there has to be a part of you inside that enjoys what is happening. And that seems to have dissipated. With the groups that I do here [at the Tenderloin AIDS Resource Center] I try to instill that in the girls, to enjoy being who they are. To enjoy what's going on. And if somebody reads you--they read you, so what, big deal. Let it go, keep going, and enjoy what you are doing--because if there isn't something drawing you to do this, with all the shit you've got to put up with to do it, you needn't do it, you know. I mean, this is not a career choice--"Hm....let me see how many people I can annoy wearing these clothes." The times are just different.

SS: So you mentioned the balls--drag balls in Chicago that you went to. Was that a really big thing?

M: They were phenomenal! It was like going to the Oscars show today. Everybody dressed up. Guys in tuxedos, queens in gowns that you would not believe--I mean, things that they would

have been working on all year. And it wasn't just Halloween--which is what it has gotten down to now. Halloween is, to me, for people who have their heads up their ass and can't figure out what to do with themselves. On this one day they let their real selves come out. At that time, Halloween was every day.

SS: So did these balls happen at certain dates every year?

M: Different days. There was a ball--different queens had different affairs. There was a queen in the south side who would do the South City Ball. There was one on the north side who would do the Maypole Ball. There were different ones in different areas at different times. There'd be one for spring, at Easter, there'd be a Thanksgiving Ball. I forget exactly what the hierarchy was. Some people would give a ball and nobody would show up because they didn't run in the right crowds or know the right people. But most of the time they were just extravaganzas. They were like watching a Vegas show. And the straight people who would come and watch, they were different than the ones who come today. They just appreciated what was going on. They would applaud the girls when they were getting out of one Cadillac after another. It was just that the money was there, and the timing was right, and the energy was there do this thing with an intensity that people just don't seem to have today. It seems to have dissipated. This thing of glamour and style and presence on top of individual personality--all this seems to be gone from the common attitude now, which is all this individualism and stuff. Then it was always a wonder--whether you participated, whether you watched, whether you just wore a little cocktail dress and a small fur coat--it was just a nice time.

SS: So were the people who did the balls--were they people who sort of lived the life every day, or were the Saturday night queens, or--?

M: Oh no, the girls who gave the balls were usually drag queens. There wasn't all this terminology, all this TS stuff--there weren't a lot of queens who wanted to be women at that time. They were on hormones to soften their skin and their appearance, not because they wanted sex reassignment. They just wanted to better their look. They were already pretty as a boy, and they all thought the hormones would make them look a little softer, a little prettier. That's how I got on them. What I saw was this tall, skinny pretty boy, and what I wanted to see was this tall, skinny, woman. I started out just staying where I was until I saw what was going on. And in going though that, what happened then that doesn't happen as much now is that I met an older queen who talked to me about stuff, who got me over things. Having them paint you up for the first time, having them tell you that since you are tall you have to wear shoes that are no more than an inch high, stay in soft colors--wear brown and navy blue, that sort of thing. But I then met this older queen who just told me "Fuck that shit. You are six-two. Wearing one-inch heels is not going to make you look six feet. You are always going to look six-two. So you may as well wear three-inch heels if you like them. If you like red, get yourself a red dress. You want to wear white, wear white. They used to dress me up, when I went to them for help, with this mouse brown hair. And at the time my head was so much bigger than my body they used to call me "Moon Maiden," which was a comic book character of the time. And I used to hate that term--just hate it! But then I got over it, and thought at least I was a maiden--you know, I wasn't Moon Bitch, or Moon Boy! So in time it worked out to be OK. I learned that you have to be doing this for yourself, and be comfortable. If one-inch heels is what you like wearing, that's fine. If it's dresses that go two inches below the knee, that's cool. Buttoned up to the neck with a

high collar because it hides your Adam's apple, that's fine because that's what you like. It doesn't make it applicable to anybody else. Maybe that's how you dress to pass, and maybe it doesn't work for that for somebody else. Through going through these sorts of things, things changing, you just get to a different point. But again, it was just fun.

SS: I was sort of interested in what you were saying a moment ago about how back then you didn't see all this labeling. What was the relationship then between what we might call the "trans" community and the "gay and lesbian" community?

M: There wasn't a relationship at all. Because they all traveled in their own circles. Everybody was typically involved in their own trips. It was hard for all of the communities--gays and lesbians and drags and TSs. You really had to unify yourself within your particular community, because the pressure from the outside was so intense. It was--I don't know, I think the difference in how it feels is that then it seemed to be more life-threatening but coupled with a sense of camaraderie and an attachment to people--people who, say, lived in your neighborhood. They might be gay or straight, but they lived in your neighborhood, and if they liked you then nobody could fuck with you in your neighborhood. Somebody would come to your defense, whether they were gay or straight. You're off your turf, then yes, you could catch shit--but maybe some gay person would help you if you were gay, or some queen if you were a queen. The TS community, they kept to themselves. At least the girls I met when I was getting my hormones were in two distinct, two different camps. The girls who really wanted to be women irregardless of whatever it takes, and the queens who wanted to take hormones because it was the thing to do at the time. And the two camps never mixed. Girls who wanted to be women thought that the queens drew far too much attention to them--that with queens they would be noticed or read, and they tried really hard to blend in. And most of the time they did--they melded and disappeared. And if they were fortunate enough to be able to get it together to go overseas and get the surgery, that was it--you never saw them again.

SS: Now, you're talking here about the late 1950s?

M: Yeah, late '50s, early '60s.

SS: So by the late 1950s it seemed like "the thing to do" to take hormones if you were a queen, almost like it was a fad?

M: It was. It was a craze. Because the thing was, when I got out and started being around people, everybody admired what Christine Jorgensen had done. There was this sense of "She was pretty before and gorgeous after, and the hormones were the reason for this look." And that was the reason. Everybody wanted to go for this look, from being attractive or pretty to being gorgeous. They thought the hormones would help them with this. Other people wanted the hormones to develop their breasts so that they could be the women that they wanted to be. And there wasn't the hang-up on size at the time. Most of the girls were not into having Jane Mansfield's tits with points that looked like guns were being held in their bras. Most of them wanted to dress appropriately for their figure whereas today people dress as outrageously as possible, drawing attention to what they perceive as "This is what guys want." Most guys are tit men so they want these huge tits no matter how they look. I don't know--to me it's kind of a self-deceived thing, because in doing this they are using their male perception of what guys want,

instead of actual people who they're around. I mean yes, most guys notice a figure and watch big-chested women, but most don't go after them, or take them home and treat them like a decent human being. Which is what I think people want. People want to be loved for who they are, shown some respect, trusted, and be treated as a human being, and avoid being trapped in the caricatures of our lifestyle--the Betty Boop cutesy image or the "I'm a dumb bitch" thing. But just to be treated with some decency, to be liked for who you are, to be able to be with you in any circumstance and to stand by you. Not to stand in front of you or behind you but beside you--you know what I mean? To just be there with you.

SS: Yeah. That's interesting, though, that in the late '50s hormones were already that accessible. That seems pretty quick to me, because they generally weren't available to people like us before Jorgensen, and hard to access even afterwards.

M: Yeah--[tape recorder malfunctions, but Major talks some about people she met in the black-market hormone doctor's office]--there, and from Detroit, and from Flint, Michigan, to see this guy. Because of course, word of mouth is always the deal in our community. Word got out that he would do this. And he had it all there. He had the pills there, and there was no such thing as write a scrip and go to a pharmacy. He used these shots--and I remember that his shots were so potent, that after he shot you in the arm you went out to sit in his waiting room and would just fall asleep. It knocked you on your ass. A lot of girls got sick. I remember it cost I think $25 for a shot, and $15 for a booster shot that he would give. He'd shoot you in the right arm, then shoot you in the left arm if you wanted a booster shot. And said that with the booster shot it activated and doubled whatever the effect of the hormones was. And at the time you didn't ask questions, you didn't know to ask questions. And to this day I don't know what was in it, but I know that at the time it made me feel like a femme fatale! And the girls used to have all these little theories about it. They used to say that if, the day after you got your hormone shot, you took three aspirins and drank a bottle of Coke you could have what they called a "hormone attack" and feel super femme for another couple of days. I don't know if it was true. Some tried it and said it worked and others tried it and said it didn't. But you know--it was just one of those little things that floats around.

SS: So the T people you ran around with, was it a racially mixed group?

M: Yeah, it really was. The percentages were mostly brown, most of the time. Most of the girls on hormones were Caucasian girls. There were no Oriental girls, and maybe on two or three other Black girls on hormones, other than me. And most of them were older than me--I was what, 16 or 17 years old? Something like that. That's also about when I got into the Jewel Box. Jewel Box came to Chicago in 1961, and they were playing on the south side at this place called the Regal Theater, and Stormy De La Verre was there and I met her--him, whatever--and I talked with her and she got me into the backstage. And then one of the dancing girls got sick, and she asked me if I could dance. Now, I was not what you would call a group person--and we were supposed to be able to dance in unison and hold on to each other like the Rockettes did, and I just couldn't get it together to do it. Always a step off, always if there was shaking putting an extra oomph in it. For me, especially me being so young at the time, I just thought I was <u>the</u> fuckin' T of the times. [Laughs] They kept trying to pull me in, get me to behave. But it was fun. Stormy got me to be one of the showgirls, because I was so tall, taller than most of the boys who were in the show who danced with the girls. They had tried to make me be one of the boys, and I didn't

want to, so they let me be one of the showgirls for a while, for four years, five. We traveled all over.

SS: Tell me more about that. Were most people who were dancing--what was their gender like? Were these mostly queens? Was it just business? What?

M: Well, some of the main performers, the main acts, the draws--like Robin Rogers, Mel Michaels, well, if I can remember some of the others more from that times, because those two were later, more like '68-'69--some of them were, I guess some of the girls would have to be considered TS. They worked hard at personifying their character on and off the stage. For them, this was a career. They planned on getting the surgery and stepping off and doing this in the legitimate theater. Because then, at the time, the way things were going, people didn't consider the Jewel Box legitimate theater.

SS: What do you mean, "The way things were going?"

M: The way most of the public looked at the Jewel Box Revue. I mean, when plays came through town--that was legitimate theater. When the review came through town, well, it was basically a joke. It wasn't taken seriously. And it was hard on the girls who wanted to be in character all of the time. Doug and Danny had a lot of rules that you had to follow to the nth. There was no give and take. You messed it up--you were out and that was it. If you inconvenienced the line, or if it bothered the performance, if you fucked up--bang!--you are out. They were rigid, really rigid about it. One of the things that was funny, though, was that you were not allowed to come into the theater painted. You had to come in as a boy. They wanted none of this gender blending, none of this androgynous stuff. And for some of the girls who wanted to stay in character all of the time, that was really hard. Because the Revue was the only way that they could make good money, it was the only way they could do that and have their lifestyle and be in the career that they wanted to be in. Other guys in there--one of the strippers and a couple of the singers--were straight guys who were just knock-out gorgeous, and this was the only way they could make decent money. They weren't spectacular enough to make it in legitimate theater, or have singing careers, and this avenue opened up and they were able to take advantage of it and just do it. Sometimes their wives were OK with it, sometimes they weren't. I remember one wife in particular who wasn't. She hated it--she spent his money, mind you--but she hated it. She really did. She used to tell us that she thought he was a latent homosexual, which he wasn't, as far as I ever knew. He never made any passes at the girls. And you kind of just develop a feel for that, you know? Just because somebody wears a dress, that doesn't mean that they are a homosexual--they just have on a dress. They go whichever way they go. Back then for most people that was inconceivable. Now it's talked about more but I don't think people actually understand it a lot better. That confusion is still there for most people who are not in the community--or at least not close enough to it to have some perception of what it is. So the times are really different now.

SS: Do you remember the names of any of the ones who wanted to stay in character all of the time?

M: I really don't. I can see them in my mind but I can't remember their names. The people that I remember most are the ones that got really close to me and made a difference in my thinking and

helped me get on with my life. Life with Doug and Danny was so severe, so intense, that it really helped me form my character, the character that I had to have to survive in life.

SS: These are the owners?

M: Yeah, they were the owners--well, they ran the show. There were other people who were the money behind it, and they were out on Long Island in New York, but I never knew them. But there was this one old queen who did the comedy act--she's the one who kept me going through it all. I called her Mamma--we all did, because that's what she was to most of us girls. And when she died it was just--just terrible. That was about '72, '73. When I got kicked out, once when we were down South, she was the one who got me back in, and she gave me money a couple of times.

SS: So you got kicked out?

M: Yes, I got kicked out for altering the outfit. See, that was the thing--you couldn't alter your costume without their approving it, and then they had to sew it, you couldn't sew it yourself. You couldn't change the design on things. If you thought the shoes didn't match the gown, too bad. Like I said, you couldn't go in and out of the theater in make-up--and that meant anything: eye-liner, mascara, eyebrows. Well actually, if you had thin eyebrows--and I had shaved mine down--they would ask me to take some mascara and thicken them. So basically they just wanted you to look like a man coming in and going out of the theater. You didn't have to wear a sports coat and slacks and a tie, but I heard from some of the older girls that at the beginning you had had to do that. But some of the girls challenged that, so that it became that as long as you looked male--because some of the girls started coming in in motorcycle gear and leather, and that proved to be OK, as long as you looked like a guy. And another thing was that you couldn't socialize with any of the locals. We were down South, and you had to go only from the theater to the hotel. They would find a restaurant they approved of, and you could order stuff and have it sent to the hotel, but you couldn't eat out. There was no socializing with the people there. The show had this thing of presenting themselves as "Twenty-Five Men and One Woman" and they didn't want people to know any different. It was hard. And I was so young at first. [Tape becomes hard to decipher. Major tells a story about having Mamma help her alter a costume, especially weighting a large hat so that it balanced on her head as she turned, rather than having to hold it with one hand the way the other dancers did] And as soon as I came off the stage Danny fired me right there on the spot.

SS: This was down South, you said?

M: Yeah, Augusta Georgia, I think--somewhere in Georgia, anyway. And that was always hard. Some of the girls could go in the front door of the hotel, but I had to go in the back door because I was black.

SS: Yeah, that's sort of what I was trying to get--I would imagine that it would be pretty scary to be a suddenly unemployed black Yankee queen in the South long about 1962 or so. Was it?

M: Yes--I mean, in my mind, I was afraid I was going to die. I thought I could be strung up somewhere. Because being raised in Chicago and New York I didn't know anything about

stepping off the sidewalk when whites were passing me. I mean, get out of their way, yes, but not actually stepping off the sidewalk--off the curb and into the street until they went by. These were just things that I didn't know. So I usually just stayed inside the hotel and didn't ever leave.

[Tape becomes practically unintelligible. Major tells about sneaking out of the hotel late at night once in the South and meeting a white guy with a huge dick. Tells about going back North to New York after being kicked out of the Revue and getting trained in computer programming, but being unable to find a programming job due to racial discrimination. Finally finds works as a computer operator in a bank in Manhattan. The computer is in a room with a big window, so that people can see it--"high tech on display" to draw customers. Major is working as a man at this point but begins to dress really flamboyantly and put on a show for customers and staff at the bank, who get a kick out of seeing this femmy back guy prance around changing tapes, pushing buttons, doing little dance moves, mugging for the audience. Finally told to knock it off by the bosses. It's also around this time that she starts using "Major" as her sole name--that it was actually her given name at birth, but that she had stopped using it for a long time and finally came back to it and appreciated that it was not a clearly gendered name. End of tape.]