

Remembering Billie Hill (1925-2002)



Billie Hill died last week amongst friends in Howell, MI.

By CHARLES ALEXANDER

Billy Hill died last week in McPherson Hospital in Howell, MI. She was 77. With her as she lay in a coma were friends, praying for her, recalling in soft voices the special place she held in their hearts and lives, and wishing her a gentle farewell.

Those who are under 40 likely will not know who Billie was or what she stood for. She is one of a courageous breed, and for the record I recall other names proudly: Eve Taylor, Big Red, Mack, Rusty, Olga, Kreger, Sky, Drano, and Speedy.

They have all gone, met long forgotten deaths, often harshly, often as outcasts and often alone. Each was a lesbian, and, full truth to tell, a self-admitted dyke when that title was pejorative and as yet unclaimed as a badge of lgbt pride.

In remembering Billie I remember and honor these women as well. Their presence and role modeling was as important and far-reaching in consequence as the Stonewall Riots that came decades later. These women, and hundreds like them, are the unsung heroes of our move-

ment.

As a gay man I was privileged to know these Detroit lesbians. I met them at the “infamous” Palais Bar, once located in walking distance of Greektown. Friendships and mutual trust developed. I even got to sit in the non-tourist section, and was taught the nuances of rotation pool by the “experts.” Importantly, at age 23, I learned about real courage from them.

They cropped their hair short, wore slacks, drank beer resolutely, romanced to Patsy Cline’s music, and stood their ground against rednecks, queer baiters and bullies. On occasion I saw straight guys back down from a confrontation. A few men got slugged. I was delighted.

But it was another matter outside fortress Palais. That’s when it took real guts to be visible. The cops made frequent checks to see if an assumed dyke had three pieces of female attire on (as required by law). Billie Hill was one who got stopped, frisked, and taken to jail regularly.

Billie’s lesbian odyssey began at 20. Her freewheeling lifestyle was too much for her mother, and she was kicked out of the house. She found a job in the hardware department of

Ford Motor Company where she worked for several years. Following this she became a respected antiques auctioneer in a business venture with a former lover, Rosie Bonham.

Billie’s retirement years included time as unofficial host of the Underground Bar, until its closing in 1995. She stationed herself at the Pac Man machine, ready to interrupt her game to listen to younger women in need of advice or conversation. Billie, who was a board member of the Metropolitan Community Church of Detroit at the time, called this her “bar ministry.”

In recent years she held court in a wheelchair and enjoyed a winning game of euchre when card-playing friends dropped by.

As you remember Billie, honor also those women of her time who lived their lives openly and honestly as dyke-courageous women. We owe them a hell of a lot. They were truly dykes to watch out for.

A memorial service, officiated by Rev. Brenda Hunt, a longtime friend of Billie’s, will be held on Sunday, Feb. 3, at 1:30 p.m., at the Divine Peace MCC Church, Clarkston MI. For details, call 248-618/1186.