

The VILLAGE PEOPLE

prove that they still have everything for young men (and young women) to enjoy!

Michael Warner

"Ladies and gentlemen, the ORIGINAL Village People!" The cowboy shouted above the throbbing disco beat. It was the only introduction necessary. A group of somewhat older, yet still familiar icons took to the stage amid wisps of artificially produced "atmosphere" (thanks to a smoke machine.) The concert began: six

men, gyrating between two large video screens with lots of flashing lights, strutting their stuff to the pre-recorded music, and singing their hearts out.

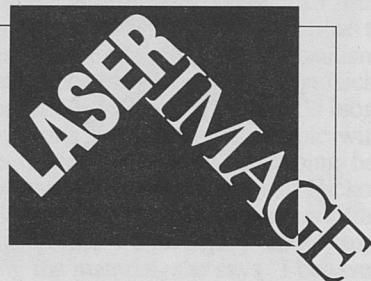
No, this is not a middle-aged flashback or a fond memory of 1978. Nor is it a dream. It really happened on a warm April evening in 1992. The same week that Gov. Dean signed Vermont's Gay Rights Bill into law, Middlebury College played host to a Village People concert. An ironic yet somehow appropriate coincidence. The group has apparently returned from virtual obscurity, (retirement?), brought on by the demise of disco, to tour again. In fact, they claimed to have spent ten of the past twelve months on the road.

Somewhat surreal is the only way I can personally describe the experience. Fourteen years ago, at the height of the Village People's popularity, when YMCA first became a hit, I was a twenty-year-old student at Middlebury College: a shy, repressed, fat, closeted and very unhappy student. For me, the Village People and their music were an escape. They were gay icons whose music appealed to the straight masses. Perhaps they could be accused of being purposefully ambiguous at times... yet they were cute -- HOT men. At least one fantasy embodied for each young gay man. Their message, buried in the heavy, repetitive disco beat, was positive and hopeful. It was certainly not lost on me that they were gay. (It was, however, lost on my parents, who happily bought me VP records. Embarrassing as it may seem, my collection numbers six.) I never imagined that I would see the group live and in concert. And truly, in 1978 for the person I was then, it would have been impossible. Only in the safety of my own room did I dare to dream... that was another lifetime.

So flash forward 14 years. The music is the same. The group is older. The cowboy has been replaced. The Indian is somewhat heavier and gone is his elaborate head-dress in favor of a colorful spiky mohawk. The construction worker is still hot (and quite willing to lose his shirt as soon as the music begins). The biker and army guy look about the same, and the cop is the second version, who sang the group's later hits. While they remain basically unchanged I'm vastly different. I take to the dance floor with my boyfriend, surrounded by a group of gay friends. There we were, dancing together, along with the 20ish Middlebury students on my home turf (I now work at Midd.) I am able to enjoy the freedom that comes once the closet doors are finally ripped off. I am happy and proud of who I am. That night I felt very empowered by the music.

The concert lasted a little over an hour. It was well attended by primarily straight, young Middlebury College students who were overjoyed by the nostalgia of the seventies. The crowd's enthusiasm and energy were impressive. The Village People did not disappoint them or me. They performed such hits as *In the Navy*, *San Francisco*, *Macho Man*, *YMCA*. They also tried a couple of new songs -- referring to themselves as the "old-kids-on-the-block." Rap disco-style was interesting.

The Village People proved that, despite everything, they still know how to please an audience. I found amid the pleasant memories a merging of my old life and my new sensibilities. It's true that you can "make real your dreams," if you put "your pride on a shelf" and CELEBRATE it and who you are. I had a good time. ▼



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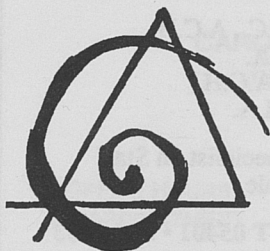
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