

Have you ever heard of the Hooker's Ball?

If you have, it was probably the one organized by Margo St. James, who founded sex workers' rights organization COYOTE (an acronym for "Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics") in 1973, marking the establishment of one of the earliest second-wave organizations of its kind.

COYOTE emerged as a significant force for sex work reform throughout the 1970s and 1980s, known for its vivid, flamboyant aesthetic and unabashedly sex-positive stance. This approach attracted a broad spectrum of young feminists, drawing support from those both inside and outside the sex trade.

Despite its radical public persona, the policies advocated by COYOTE were, ultimately, fundamentally liberal and focused on legislative change. Their goal, in their own words, was to create a loose union of women, both prostitutes and other feminists, to "fight for legal change." This agenda mirrored the reformist ambitions of earlier activists, aiming to enact pragmatic and systemic changes within the existing socio-political framework.

One of COYOTE's most notable initiatives was the annual Hooker's Masquerade Ball, launched in 1974. Initially conceived as a fundraiser for their newsletter, COYOTE Howls, the event eventually supported the organization's legal fund and

the St. James Infirmary, a medical clinic dedicated to providing care for sex workers in the San Francisco area.

These balls were glittering, exuberant affairs, where current and former sex workers mingled with a diverse crowd that included drag queens, students, and even police officers. Media coverage of the Hooker's Balls painted an image of COYOTE's activities as sensational, radical, and all-inclusive. While these depictions captured the group's spirit of inclusivity and celebration, they did not fully represent its organizational focus.

Notably, COYOTE's outreach did not specifically target women of color or the LGBT community, and many of its board members were sex workers who, despite still facing significant dangers and social ostracization, operated in relatively safer environments compared to many of their contemporaries.

Furthermore, much of their advocacy resembled the feminist activism of the earlier feminist waves, with a significant emphasis on rehabilitating the images and conditions of sex workers rather than fundamentally transforming the system.

Additionally, the broader radical reforms proposed by COYOTE were often hindered by the practical limitations in influencing policing and legal practices. The sensational aspects of their advocacy sometimes overshadowed the more substantial, though less visually captivating, legislative efforts.

In retrospect, Margo St. James and COYOTE were undoubtedly pioneers on a cultural level, challenging societal norms and advocating for a marginalized group with unprecedented visibility. However, the inner workings and focus of the organization reveal the recurring challenges and limitations of feminist activism in this realm.