

WORDS James Anderson

front:BOTTOM

YEAH BUTT, NO BUTT...

Five faggy years old, ultra-cult **BUTT** magazine has grown up, spread its wings (or should that be cheeks?) and been assembled into an ass-kicking book

Mundane, sexy, mouthy, intellectual, arty, élitist, filthy, funny – all words which might be applied to the small, pink-coloured, Dutch homosexual publishing phenomena that is **BUTT**. Like a tiny-budget fanzine, yet one with the discerning editorial values and art direction of a magazine-proper, **BUTT** has garnered cult status among global gays since its debut five years ago, when fashion designer Bernhard Willhelm graced the pages with a smile and stiffy.

This blueprint has permeated subsequent issues which are sold by mail order, or in forward-thinking fashion boutiques and specialist bookstores. Result? Interviewees are not only comfortable about baring all in conversation, but often for the camera also. But **BUTT** is not – despite the plethora of images of penises, or naked hairy bears, or scantily clad fashion designers, or even the readers' regular saucy sex confessions – simply an obvious smut-fest. It has heart and soul, wit and wisdom, in a modern homosexual world where image and agenda, PR bollocks and conformity are often considered more important.

In this sense, the magazine made its debut amid an exciting, innovative time in underground gay culture – when growing numbers of gay men began to react against the neutering effects of so-called metrosexuality, manufactured pop stars and predictable super clubs, not to mention the somewhat fascist dictates of gym culture. **BUTT** slotted into an emerging, international cultural wave of adventurous, non-jaded fagdom, that not only celebrated a DIY spirit found in new club nights and music (the burgeoning electroclash scenes of Larry Tee's NYC after-hours soirées, or London clubs like NagNagNag and The Cock, for example), but also straddled hard-to-pigeonhole writers such as JT Leroy, in the US, or the redefining of men's fashion by Paris-based designers such as Hedi Slimane at Dior Homme and the appearance of proper pop groups such as Scissor Sisters, and so on.

BUTT has consistently featured candid and sometimes comedic Q&A interviews with prime homosexual movers and shakers from the worlds of contemporary music, fashion, film and art. This roster includes, to list a few, musicians Michael Stipe and Rufus Wainwright, designers Marc Jacobs and Viktor & Rolf, film makers Gus Van Sant and John Waters, ex-*Attitude* columnist Mark Simpson, not to mention Christopher Ciccone, brother of Madonna, and all of Scissor Sisters' Jake Shears' ex-boyfriends, spilling the beans on the popstrel's prowess in the sack.

This month it reaches its fifth year; the geniuses behind it have put together the **BUTT Book** – a compendium of all the greatest hits with some special yet-to-be-seen extras thrown in for good measure. To celebrate we decided to join its creators – art director Jop Van Bennekom and journalist Gert Jonkers – for a few bevies in the notorious dark and dingy Amsterdam bar Spijker, to find out more.

What did you dream of becoming when you were kids?

Jop: I wanted to be a pop star – everyone wants that, don't they? I dreamt about it, but I am a realistic person, so it didn't happen. My father had a garage and I'm the only son, so it was presumed that I would work there. I then wanted to be a graphic designer. I started collecting record sleeves and magazine logos, and cut out the advertisements from magazines. I also worked in a meat factory for a while – it was icy cold, and no, it wasn't homoerotic at all!

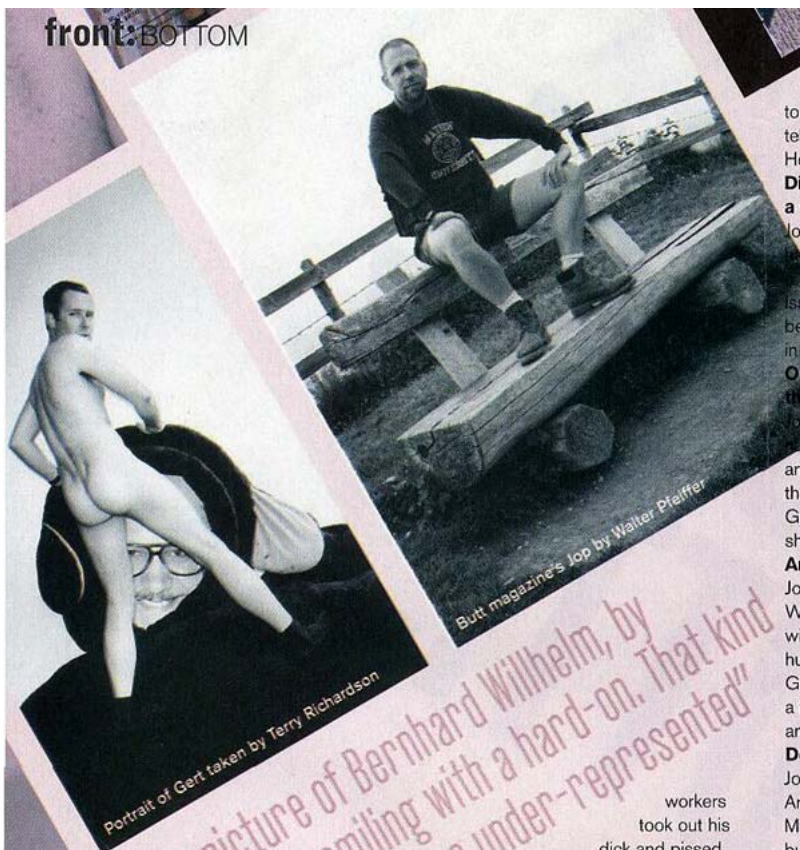
Gert: When I was about 10 I wanted to be a heart surgeon. Then, after that, I wanted to be a prostitute – which is strange, as I totally wasn't a whore. It was because I felt different, and so I thought I wanted a job that was as different as possible from the Christian college that I was attending in north Amsterdam. By the time I was 18, I was a singer and I played organ, then piano, then guitar. I did this for about five or six years, performing three nights a week. A lot of rehearsing, songwriting. I stopped, though, around the time house music appeared. I was envious of the freedom of some of my friends who were making techno music. I also realised I preferred singing in the soundcheck when there was no one there more than when there was a room full of people watching me on stage.

When did it first dawn on you both that you were gay?

Gert: It slowly dawned on me, though all my classmates were already making jokes about it. At 15 I was in love with my best friend Frank for about six months. It didn't even occur to me that he could be my boyfriend, but it all bloomed when I was 16 and we did become boyfriends. Of course it ended in tears, then I moved to Amsterdam. I wonder what happened to him?

Jop: I'm a country boy – most of my family are farmers. One of my first erotic experiences happened when I was about nine or ten years old, working on my uncle's farm. For some reason I was underneath a truck one day, and one of the

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Portrait of Gert taken by Terry Richardson

Butt magazine's Jop by Walter Pfeiffer

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workers took out his dick and pissed. He didn't know why. I was watching from under the truck. I was excited and afraid, but didn't know why. It was the first time I felt a sexual feeling. But I always knew I was gay. I was a lonely child from a lower-middle class family – we lived an hour away from Amsterdam – and there weren't many people I could share it with, so I know how it feels for young people now in that situation.

Did you used to devour magazines as a means of escape?

Gert: I was more of a book person. I did collect crappy biographies of Bryan Ferry and Amanda Lear, though. It was coincidence that I ended up in journalism – I worked as a photographer semi-professionally for a couple of years before getting a job on a Netherlands gay magazine doing club reviews and interviews. Jop: When I was about 13 I would go to flea markets to get clothes and stuff for my room. At one, organised by the church, there was a container nearby for people to dump used paper in. I found a huge chunk of porn in there – straight porn. I still like straight porn. I prefer it to gay porn, the men are less aware of their looks and it feels voyeuristic, which is more exciting. It's not PC, but I like Rocco Sifredi's films – basically, hardcore fuck-sex. Aside from that, I would read stuff like *Smash Hits* full of all those bands popular in England but not yet popular in the Netherlands. Then *Melody Maker*, *The Face*, *Blitz*, *NME*. I was really into The Smiths – I tried to start a Smiths fan club. I met a guy who was a Smiths fan from another village – I went to his house and we played records and looked at Smiths pictures in his room. I guess something could have happened, but it didn't.

Why did you launch BUTT?

Gert: We had a lot of gay friends, we went to a lot of gay bars, but my work at the time [editing the Dutch style magazine *Boulevard*] was quite straight. I thought it would be fun to combine the two and do a magazine all about our other life. We didn't recognise ourselves very much in other gay magazines – we didn't feel there was a magazine that spoke to us. For example, there was a barman who worked here at Spijker who was a painter, yet no one had ever seen his paintings. So we thought, why not see them in a magazine? Even if they are bad, it would still be interesting. Then there was this other bar, The Web, which is quite a dark, leather sort of place. On a Sunday they would serve a dinner there; it seemed so strange that people would go and eat in a place where people shit on each other. So we dreamt of doing an interview with the chef. We still haven't actually interviewed the barman-painter or the chef, though! Jop: We felt there was a huge need for it. The whole gay world was so closeted in a way. It felt boring to be homosexual. The subversive side was not being represented in the media, instead it was all about gay pride, all about being a consumer – you felt like you were just a target for a new deodorant. I never felt represented. We wanted to make a magazine that we were both dying to read and that was also very literal, very close to how we were living our lives. We wanted

to do interviews with people that were more real, with no shame. Get people to tell the truth – talk about their fears, or even just talk about something mundane. Hopefully *BUTT* can suggest that it is cool to be gay again.

Did people 'get' BUTT straight away, after it launched, or did it take a while for it to make sense?

Jop: We had an explosion of emails after we launched it. After all, there was hardly any representation of alternative gay culture at the time – that could mean a gay farmer, for example, or just something that is sexually honest. By the time of issue 4, we did a party in New York in the heyday of electroclash and *BUTT* had become not a movement exactly but people all over the world became interested in what we were doing.

Out of all the interviewees so far, who do you think has most captured the essence of BUTT?

Jop: Casey Spooner because he's so honest. He's like half fashion, half pop star, half bullshit, opportunistic, sweet. Or when I interviewed AA Bronson [a Toronto artist and healer] and he gave me a butt massage while we talked – it's nice when there is more to it than just chatting!

Gert: The guy who can self-suck was good, too. It has to be people who have no shame, basically, because I think shame is the most boring thing there is.

And which photograph has most summed up BUTT's own sexy ethos?

Jop: When we first launched, there was a picture of Bernhard Wilhelm, by Wolfgang Tillmans – who was a friend of a friend – and Bernhard was smiling, with a hard-on. That kind of friendly sexuality was so under-represented. The humour worked well.

Gert: My favourite picture is from the New York issue, of our friend Lenert in a forest. He's wearing a vintage Levis T-shirt, his pants are down around his ankles, and he has his little dog in his hand.

Do you get lots of people asking to be featured in BUTT?

Jop: So many people email us saying things like, "I'm an interesting artist from Arizona, can I be in the magazine?" Famous people are often scared. George Michael should be in *BUTT* – he's a butt-slut! I think we approached his PR once, but we never heard back. The thing is, with famous people, they usually only want to do interviews when they have something to promote – but we want to talk to them at the precise time when they don't have a CD or film to sell!

Gert: It's not like we are a music magazine where PRs are calling us all the time. Rupert Everett's PR called and wanted to do something that would come out at the same time as his film, but we said we didn't want to do that. I asked Karl Lagerfeld, but he said he didn't think it was an appropriate magazine for him, as being gay is not an issue to him. I said we could talk about other things than being gay. George Michael could be fun, though.

How did the interview with Madonna's brother, Christopher, come about?

Gert: That was from my own personal interest in him. I saw *In Bed With Madonna* when it came out, and I was totally intrigued by him. I thought he looked really good. Then you kind of never heard anything about him after that. If you googled him there was, like, two hits, then millions of hits for Madonna, of course. So I wondered where he was, and what happened to him. He insisted on keeping his sunglasses on for the picture, which is not something we would usually do – we don't want people to be hiding themselves.

Are you less likely to feature people who refuse to take their clothes off in the magazine?

Jop: No, there has to be a balance of the erotic next to the intellectual, but sex should be a subject that is discussed in all the interviews. And all the men featured in the magazine have to be gay. Most of the people who work for us are gay, as well.

You said that BUTT was meant to affirm that it is cool to be gay again. So, what's good about being a homosexual nowadays?

Gert: To be men and to have sex with other men – imagine if you couldn't do that? It would be so dull! If you're gay you can remain 'young' while growing up. I don't mean just about looks – to grow gracefully older is quite beautiful. I was once talking to Neil Tennant about this and I asked him, "Do you hate getting older?" And he said, "There's only one way to really get older, and that's to have children." Jop: It's good to embrace that 'difference', to dare to be different. You have that opportunity to lead a different kind of life than you do when you are straight. I feel pretty free. I love being gay.

What do you most like about each other?

Jop: Gert is the most reliable person – if he says he will do something, he will do it. He can do 50 things in a day – it's hard to keep up with him.

Gert: Well, I function with a sense of doubt, so it is super-exciting to work with someone like Jop who is so confident, pushy and not doubtful at all.

Finally, but very importantly, what do you think about each others' butts?

Jop: Gert has a good butt, you can see a picture of it in the book. It's kind of big, a very Dutch ass – we do so much cycling here from when we're young that our upper legs and butts get well developed.

Gert: Jop's butt is impressive, it's pretty good. I've actually seen it more in pictures than for real. You couldn't say anything bad about it, really.

'BUTT Book' is published by Taschen on 14 October at £16.99
www.buttmagazine.com