

[Cover] identity

Mad about the boi

KATRINA FOX EXPLORES BOI CULTURE IN AUSTRALIA AND WHAT IT MEANS TO THOSE WHO TAKE ON THE IDENTITY.

The word 'boi' has been floating around for some time in the queer community.

For some, it's merely an updated term for 'butch'. Others claim it as a gender identity or as a genderless social or sexual descriptor, while still others identify as both boi and woman. In her book *Female Chauvinist Pigs* US author Ariel Levy portrays bois as aggressive pimps or 'bros' seeking female 'hos' to treat badly, while academic commentators such as Camille Paglia accuse bois of undermining their sense of credibility by clinging to a "juvenile phase of manhood – louche and boorish".

CHERRIE spoke with four Australian bois to get the lowdown on what the label means to them.

MARINA

Our cover boi, 33-year-old Marina Nestoriadis from Sydney, says being a boi means "a proud expression of masculine femaleness".

"Boi to me is almost a gender-neutral term that incorporates a fusion of strong male traits. I would describe myself as having a masculine facade, with the inner softness

and understanding that women offer. It also means male gender role play. I feel it's not a strict identity that conforms me to butch/femme roles nor does it have the broadness of lesbianism. I am not holding the harshness of bio-male domination and can identify freely as a biological female whilst having the freedom to be who I am."

While identifying as a boi "100 per cent of the time", Marina is "very happy and very comfortable" with her female physique. "I've never had gender-related issues regarding my sex or any form of dysphoria regarding the female aspects of my body," she says. "I'm happy to use female pronouns and I think this separates me from being trans/FTM. Being a boi for me is a lifestyle, a choice, an expression of my female masculinity."

For Marina the boi culture in Australia is "very far removed" from that portrayed

in the US by Levy. "I think that Australian bois have their own style that incorporates Aussie values and social codes. I have found that for myself and other bois in my social network we have complete respect and understanding for our women."

As far as her women go, Marina is "very much attracted to feminine women. I absolutely adore women in all shapes and sizes".

Marina also rejects notions that boi/girl relationships have an element of homophobia in that such couples may seek to appear straight in mainstream society. "In my



>> world the heterosexual roles in homosexual relationships seem to fit and come naturally for me," she muses. "I also believe that the term *boi* falls under the gay/lesbian umbrella terminology. Old-school dynamics of *boi/wife* are really a turn on for me, but I know it's not for everyone."

KERRIE (right)

Originally from Byron Bay in NSW and now living in Melbourne, 32-year-old Kerrie Knowles sees the term *boi* as "part of a social/sexual identity, not a gender definition" and as "an updated version of the non-feminine part of the old stereotype of *butch/femme*".

Kerrie has always identified with the characteristics that are now described as *boi*, but, like Marina, doesn't identify as *trans* or *FTM* and is comfortable with her femaleness. "I was always more comfortable in jeans or pants, and I always preferred my hair very short," she explains. "I identify as a woman and as a *boi* all the time. I am both all the time. For me, *boi* is a description of the type of woman/lesbian I am in my social role. My *boi* identity is similar to that of a 'soft butch'. I never cease to be female – I just claim the right to choose how I express my femaleness. I don't see why heterosexual/patriarchal society gets to decide what qualities 'belong' to a certain gender. I thought feminism got rid of those so-called 'rules' years ago!"

Also like Marina, Kerrie is attracted to feminine women – or rather feminine lesbians. "I'm a *dyke* who likes *dykes* ... not *bi* or straight women," she asserts. "I am only attracted to women, usually *femme* women, but not necessarily 'high' *femme*. Looking like a *dyke* is fine. I'm not attracted to men at all, or anyone who identifies as a man. I haven't as yet found myself attracted to *FTM*, or *MTF*, or *trans* *bois*. My attraction to women lies in their femininity, softness, 'curvaciousness'. I haven't as yet found myself attracted to other *bois* – strong 'dyke' *femmes* yes, but not *bois*."

Kerrie also rejects the misogynistic *boi* culture of the US. "I'm a monogamous leather *boi*, submissive *top/bottom*. I think of myself as a 'gentleboi' with considerate manners. I hope to be a person who respects the woman I'm with. I do what I can to make people in general feel comfortable, and I hope that this quality is present in my *boi* identity."

Even though Kerrie is a *boi* in her girlfriend's eyes, she still refers to her as her girlfriend. "I call myself a girlfriend, not a *boy/boyfriend*," she says. "Boi in identity ... woman in gender. I reserve the right to stretch the 'woman' boundary to include however a lesbian chooses to 'be'."

TARN

While Marina and Kerrie identify as both women and *bois*, some people feel more attuned to a masculine gender identity, such as Tarn, 42, from Brisbane. "I am a *boi*. I use that title because I do not identify in any way, apart from unfortunate biological bits, as a female," Tarn says. "Being female to me denotes being *femme*. This is something I have never been nor aspired to be. I am and have always been *butch*. The older I have got, the more my identity and comfort with being *butch* has grown."

Yet Tarn doesn't identify as *trans* or *FTM*. "I have toyed with the idea over many years but the space I feel I now fit is what you would call 'genderless'. My female biology is a redundant and worthless part of who I am but I do not feel the need to change it. While I identify and am identified as a *boi* or *butch*, it is my constant identity, though



that doesn't mean any stereotypes for me as in the norm of male hardness and not being able to show any emotions. I can be a soft *butch*, tender and gentle, nurturing, yet hard as rocks when I need to [be]."

Having witnessed the US *boi* culture personally, Tarn agrees there is a "small element" of truth to Levy's portrayal "especially in the *butch/femme* sub-culture".

"I do though know that when I have been with my 'butch brothers' we do at times find it very easy to slip into a persona that allows us to tease and be almost arrogant and acting like a bunch of pimps towards *femmes*!" Tarn laughs. "But don't they love it – such sweet little things they are!"

A big difference in US and Australian *boi* culture, according to Tarn, is that of appearance. "In the US to be *boi* doesn't appear to depend so much on appearance as it does here. I have met a lot of *bois* in

the US who have long hair and tend to look what is more seen here as androgynous or even verging on *femme*. It appears to be much more a state of mind and being than physical identity."

Tarn describes his sexuality as asexual. "I have only ever been attracted to women and always identified as lesbian. I do not, however, get involved often in relationships. I find them too much hard work! I am attracted to intellect in people rather than so much identity but equally can find certain traits to be a put-off. For example, a woman who identifies as a 'high *femme*' is a prissy pain in the butt to me 98 per cent of the time! I find them very 'airy fairy' whereas I am a very down-to-earth person who doesn't mind getting their hands dirty for relaxation."

RABBIT (main pic)

Further down the male gender identity spectrum is the *trans* or 'trannie' *boi*. Melbourne-based Rabbit Hutch, 32, is "finally getting there" in terms of his *FTM* gender journey. "It has taken me a while, due to whatever reason but I feel more comfortable with moving along that route," he says.

Rabbit believes there is a difference between an *FTM/trans* identity and that of *boi*. "Perhaps the *boi* thing is a bit more labelling, while the other two are, I'd say, more at the end of the journey."

It's important to Rabbit that he is read as a male although he's not "militant" about it. "I feel like a guy always [and] my friends and partner identify me as one. I never have understood the concept a lot of the time to being a woman but they are awesome to be around."

As far as sexuality goes, he's found that it's become fluid over time. "I used to think I was big into *femmes*, had a few long-lasting relationships that way but I questioned that after a while," he explains. "For whatever good reason I am now really into a young cute *boi/boy*, whatever. Sometimes real *femmes* can be intimidating."

Even this brief snapshot into the world of *bois* shows that they're an incredibly diverse group and the term incorporates a large range of identities. The birth of queer or genderqueer culture means that debate around such identities will continue as individuals personalise labels, making them expansive rather than restrictive. Kerrie, does, however, offer up an interesting difference between *boi* and *butch*: "Bois actually like shopping and clothes – even though we often need advice!"

What do you think? What does the term *boi* mean to you? Comment at www.cherrie.com.au.