

CHAPTER 8

THE MAFIA: STRAIGHT AND GAY AND MAYBE NOT

- **Editor-in-Chief Tunes Up *Drummer* Issues 19-33, 1977-1980**
- **From “Old Guard Leather” to the “New Gender of Homomascularity”**
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TV-Gay Thumbnail. *The Ritz*: The Mafia gets tangled up with Manhattan denizens of a gay bathhouse (Think: “Continental Baths plus Bette Midler”) in Terrence McNally’s hit Broadway sex farce (1975) and cult movie (1977).

Embry never “got” me.
 I never “got” him.
 He was petulant.
 I was impetuous.
 We were totally unrequited.
 We were destined for each other.

Drummer editor Joseph Bean wrote in his *Drummer* history essay “Nobody Did It Better,” published first by the Leather Archives & Museum in its *Leather Times* #1 (2007), that in 1977 I had pulled Embry’s fat out of the fire in the drama that was *Drummer*, and to Embry’s chagrin, everyone knew it. In a decade where everybody was balling everybody, particularly in the leather culture around *Drummer* at venues on Folsom Street, between

Embry and me there was “minus zero degrees of fuck.” In fact, I never sighted Embry in any louche leather lair lower than a bar. He was, *suum cuique*, not a gonzo journalist, not a leatherman, and not a player at the after-hours clubs and baths on Folsom Street, nor at private orgies at the Catacombs, nor homes about town. In 1997, he admitted in *Manifest Reader* 33 (page 5) that he had been a recluse in the 1970s when he recalled the super parties like *Night Flight* and *Stars* which I reported on in *Drummer*. He wrote:

...I remember devoting a lifetime avoiding such affairs – It was only reluctantly that I even attended our own [*Drummer*] parties in those days.

Jeanne Barney told me when I asked specifically:

I always felt that John was a leather poseur, but why? I don't know. To compete with the famous leather star, Larry [Townsend]? To distinguish himself from every other unattractive guy at the bar? Because there were better pickings at the leather bars where hungry bottoms will go with almost anyone who will top them?

Embry's occasional appearance in leather bars was always about business. He swanned about like a Kiwanis Club booster glad-handing bar owners and popper manufacturers to solicit advertising dollars for *Drummer* and *Drummer* “one-offs” like his Spring 1980 magazine, *The Folsom Attitude*, tagged as “A *Drummer* Action Guide to Folsom Street,” whose entire editorial content plugged bars, baths, and businesses like a press agent's brochure for sex tourists. Embry, constantly copying other business models, longed to muscle in on the territory of Bob Damron who was the publisher of the *Damon Guide* series of popular travel books as well as the founding owner of several bars including Febe's leather bar at the southwest corner of 11th Street and Folsom. Embry, imitating Damron's travel guide, and wanting to clone the quintessential leather appeal of Febe's, opened up his *Drummer* Key Club on the northwest corner of the same intersection.

Years later after *Drummer* was made even more international by its new Dutch owner, Damron chanced the wisdom of buying a full-page *Drummer* ad touting the company's “travel services since 1964.” (*Drummer* 159, December 1992)

Regarding the success among masculine-identified gay men of the grass-roots homomascularity concept as framed in *Drummer*, the famously

queeny *Damron Guide* finally homomaskulinized its image when its president Gina Gata, chasing homomaskulinity, announced on September 27, 2007,

When we were looking for a new marketing twist and many of our hundreds of thousands of readers both online and with the guide asked for more a modern and *masculine* [italics added] look, I called my friend John Rutherford of Colt. We've already heard rave reviews from our solid stable of retailers, distributors, and the like on how much they love the new cover with Colt men Carlo Masi and Adam Champ. —*Adult Video News*, AVN.com

Trying for business synergy in 1980, and perhaps trying to triage *Drummer* fatiguing from the money sucked out of it by gouging printers and delinquent distributors, Embry leased the bar and famous swimming pool at 11th and Folsom, across the intersection from Febe's, to open "The *Drummer* Key Club" and his "Studstore." This bar and pool had been the hot-mobbed after-hours sex club, the Covered Wagon, which had an official fire department capacity of 170 people and after midnight rented SRO space to 300-400 men. It had also been Allen Lowery's Leatherneck Bar (*Drummer* 18), Dirty Sally's, the Stables, and the Plunge (*Drummer* 29, page 72). See "Key Club Carpenters," *Drummer* 41 (September 1980). The photo spread features "Robert Payne's" camp dialog balloons as well as photographs by a variety of shutterbugs, including a photo lensed by Sparrow-Fritscher, and credited on page 44 to Sparrow, although we had given no permission to reprint this photo which—to correct Embry's falsehood—was not shot in the *Drummer* Key Club as asserted, but was shot two years before in Embry's former failed startup, The Quarters, in a basement South of Market. See *Drummer* 24 (September 1978) and *Drummer Rides Again* (1979).

One thing I give Embry credit for is that while he owned *Drummer* and Alternate Publishing, he became a house-proud real-estate mogul in San Francisco and at the Russian River. One of my first conversations with Embry in 1977 was our mutual agreement that gays to protect ourselves from greedy landlords, should buy our own homes and studios. Later in life, Jeanne Barney often spoke of Embry bragging on about his adventures as a landlord buying, selling, and managing rental properties for thirty years while he was a publisher. During those three decades, every Christmas, Embry would return to LA to visit his family in Pomona and to lunch at the French Quarter on Santa Monica Boulevard with early *Drummer* pals including Barney, filmmakers Terry LeGrand and Roger Earl, and

sometimes Larry Townsend. The stylish and tiny Barney was the only woman at a table of increasingly plump old men whose friendly nostalgia for the good old days could quickly morph into competition, bragging, and attitude. On December 24, 2007, Barney wrote me the day after the latest of the traditional Christmas luncheons:

Brunch went well. I realize that now [that] I've accepted the fact that I'll never get my \$ out of him [Embry], and [that] I don't have to spend much time with him, he's bearable. I do wish, though, that ...[he] would not regale me with stories of costly remodeling and brand-new LG appliances for...apartments.

Drummer was wildly popular in the late 1970s, yet always burdened with mysterious debt. Al Shapiro and I sensed that *Drummer* profits were financing Embry's fast-moving real-estate deals. He was living off the *Drummer* buck. Respecting that his business was his business, we began to protect our own professional interests inside *Drummer* especially after our salaries trickled down so slowly to nothing in 1979 at the Divisadero office. As soon as Al and I quit because of money owed us, the publisher of the "cash-strapped" *Drummer* suddenly produced an instant down-payment and bought a new office on Harriet Street, South of Market in 1980.

If we'd been in synch, Embry and Shapiro and I in the 1980s might have grown *Drummer* progressively transcendent and practical even as the curse of HIV pulled *Drummer* back from being a 1970s sex magazine with *verite* photographs of real players. In January 1980, four things reshaped 1970s *Drummer*:

1) Shapiro and I exited ending what readers, historians, and Embry called the 1970s "Golden Age of *Drummer*";

2) the new Mr. Drummer Contest reshaped editorial content into a kind of leather-runway fanzine;

3) the arrival of corporate video studios paying for their slick professional models to appear in *Drummer* pushed aside real grass-roots photographs of attainable leather tricks, characterized in reader's selfies featured in the monthly "Tough Customers" column; and

4) AIDS changed the sexual lifestyle from liberal to conservative.

The upside of *Drummer* featuring hundreds of pages of leather contestants is that those photos are a happy record of a generation of leathermen snapped as they are bravely carrying on even while being hit with the tsunami of HIV. Some anti-contest readers complained that 1980s *Drummer* had caught "sash rash" from its Mr. Drummer Contest and published too

many repetitive pages of leather contestants. However, of those plague years, who can say if the tail wagged the dog? The historical value of those photos is that some of those dear young men during that first desperate decade of AIDS sported big smiles bravely covering the fact they knew they were positive and this was their last chance to be drop-dead gorgeous before they faded away: sashes to ashes.

As a Mr. Drummer Contest judge and as a video director, I fell privy to a certain back-story narrative told on a sad loop. Having shot five or six Palm Drive feature videos of several handsome Mr. Drummer contestants like Larry Perry (Mr. Detour Leather) in *Naked Came the Stranger*, Wes Decker (Mr. Southeast Drummer) in *Sodbuster*, and Rick Conder (Mr. Southwest Drummer) in *Leather Saddle Cowboy Bondage*, I became both eyewitness and, perhaps because of my eleven years of training for the priesthood, a kind of father confessor administering Last Rites. I asked Keith Ardent, star of my *Pec Stud in Black Rubber*, whom I shot for the *Rubberotica* cover and interior photo spread of *Drummer* 118 (July 1988): Why are you doing this? He said: “Your camera makes me immortal. I want to be shot by as many photographers as possible.” Leather contests such as International Mr. Leather and its imitator Mr. Drummer were the opposite of the closet. They offered to males born outside the “straight pale” a chance to stand up in public to be cheered as victorious male personalities exhibited as good as and as valid as their straight brothers. To Embry, Mr. Drummer was little more than a publicity stunt staged to exploit the eager models and the ticket-buying leather community in order to provide him free photographs of “his” contestants.

Under Embry and Rowberry from 1980-1986, *Drummer* recycled several of my original fetish themes such as “cigars” and “older men and daddies.” Mostly, however, they diluted the essential leatherfolk reality show of 1970s *Drummer* photography. They welcomed slick photos of *faux*-leather porn models provided free by the first-emerging new video companies. The cost-conscious Embry gladly sold his covers and centerfolds to the highest corporate bidder salivating for international product placement of its video stars on a *Drummer* cover. In the 1970s, *Drummer* had feasted on *verite* leather and S&M “movies shot on film” by a select few talents: Fred Halsted, Wakefield Poole, the Gage Brothers, and Roger Earl with Terry LeGrand who produced the controversial Southern California Mr. Drummer Contest in 1991. In 1982, startup video companies, hearing Embry pitch his monthly press run at 42,000 copies, thought *Drummer* could make kosher their *faux*-leather actors zipped into “costume” chaps. Because Embry was neither personally nor erotically into the existential quintessence of leather itself, he

never understood his corporate trespass was betraying the authenticity of *Drummer* for readers who were true leather loyalists.

The very word *Drummer* was an endorsement. In 1996, one May midnight in Paris, Mark Hemry and I, searching addresses for #14 along Rue Keller near the Bastille, rang the bell at Keller's bar, and stood waiting in the cold dark. The brusque doorman was a hard-case inquisitor turning away voyeurs on the doorstep. Enforcing Keller's strict fetish dress code, he judged who drank at the bar and who played in the dark back room. Did our big boots and black Levi's cancel our being American? Between his bouncer English and our menu French, before gestures turned to silly pantomime, I said the magic words: "Je suis l'éditeur de *Drummer*." *Drummer* was a powerful international code word. We were immediately swept into the leather heart of the Paris underworld that was Keller's, with its front bar and its infamous back room.

BDSM VIDEO: GAY FILMS, SILENT IN THE 1970S, BECAME "TALKIES" IN THE 1980S

Between 1979 and 1982, the cost of producing gay popular culture on screen dropped one million percent. The silent films—the gay art-porn films of the 1970s—identified by the personal esthetics of their directors such as LeGrand-Earl's *Born to Raise Hell*, Fred Halsted's *Sextool*, Wakefield Poole's *Boys in the Sand*, and Peter Berlin's *That Boy*, disappeared into the "talking pictures" of assembly-line porn videos of the 1980s that turned authentic homosexual into a corporate commodity. It was the difference between leather and Naugahyde. It was a revolution. There is a difference between the precise economy of shooting leathermen on film with an involved director's acute personal point of view and the wanton shooting of hours of corporate footage of actors hired to play leathermen.

Film costs a fortune with each frame shot. Video costs pennies. New Orleans photographer George Dureau, Mapplethorpe's mentor, told me that "The camera is a mindless lunatic." The photographer must control the instrument. After the disciplined underground gay films of the Swinging Sixties and the Titanic 1970s, lunatic video rose as just one more piece of the 1980s iceberg. When Embry hopped on the wagon as a video producer, he further distressed the schedule and budget needed to sustain the magazine itself. In-house video-making at *Drummer* was an ill-fated undertaking, too often featuring miscast twinkly blond modelles like the human Easter Peep, self-sucker Scott O'Hara. Embry had little talent as producer or director, and did not long sustain his efforts at making his own *Drummer* videos

which he had dreamed would make him a fortune in his mail-order business. In truth, the only *Drummer* publisher to produce viable *Drummer*-worthy videos was Tony DeBlase with his wild *USSM* series of BDSM films shot in the 1990s by Mikal Bales, founder of Zeus Studio. Like the Skulls of Akron's intense BDSM dungeon videos of the 1980s (some shot at the Mineshaft), DeBlase's *USSM* series was also censored by government agencies and pulled from circulation.

In the 1970s, as always, the first thing out of the mouth of a customer entering a porn store was, "What's new?" I lay awake at night pondering what could be "new" to *Drummer* readers notorious for trying everything once. In that lay an answer: the young men always know. So I went to them. In the way a music producer goes to underground clubs to listen for new sounds, and a fashion designer hits the streets to see what new look the kids have thought up, I, who, unlike Embry, was both eyewitness and player, went into the streets, the bars, the bruncheries, the baths, the clubs, the playrooms, the prisons, the rodeos, and wrote notes in my journal, bought film for my camera, shot the shit, and brought back *verite* material for *Drummer* from venues like San Quentin (*Drummer* 21) and the Academy Training Center (*Drummer* 145).

Everything I wrote for *Drummer* was grounded in fact rinsed in the conscious erotic rhythms of authentic sex.

PAY UP, OR CALL THE MAFIA

If Christopher Isherwood could say about his stint in Berlin, "I Am a Camera," the same is analogously true about my eyewitness-camera montage of my early leather adventures in Amsterdam, Paris, London, West Berlin, Tokyo, Kyoto, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. It was the 1960s and 1970s, and gay men lived on jet planes. On May 1, 1969, I had flown to England on a narrow-bodied Pan Am 707 with three seats on each side of the one aisle. The bone-shaking experience gave me a full understanding of the hysterical camp "conversion" of frightened hooker Sally Mckee (Jan Sterling) tissing off her whore makeup on a damaged airliner conking out over the Pacific Ocean in *The High and the Mighty* (1954). On my trans-Atlantic flight, I'll never forget how the beautifully dressed young mother, sitting next to me and traveling without her husband, handed me her baby to hold while she rested for a couple hours. She calmed two little boys at once.

In Amsterdam, two weeks later, a newspaper headline announced that the first Jumbo Jet was debuting in LA. This was one month before

Stonewall, and I enjoyed the Busby Berkeley musical-comedy production number in the Associated Press photo of the pilots and stewardesses standing on the wings of the Jumbo Jet. I was staying at the leather S&M Argos Hotel whose foundation was footed in the gay middle ages (1950) when the owners of the building, circumventing police and building codes, turned their living room into the Argos Bar and their bedrooms into a sanctuary hotel of sadomasochism. I had no expense account. I paid my own way. I lived it up to write it down, and poured the cream of sex into my writing and eventually into *Drummer*.

Early on Friday afternoon, August 3, 1979, in the *Drummer* office, with Al Shapiro witnessing what he wanted to find out, John Embry made a fatal mistake that revealed his character and eventually cost him the ownership of *Drummer*.

That afternoon, I asked Embry for my back pay at \$400 a month (nearly \$4000, a huge total back then), and said if I weren't paid, I'd be giving notice that I was finishing up all my incremental editorial progress toward the autumn issues 31, 32, and 33, which took *Drummer* through December 1979. Because Embry had only recently returned from his bout with cancer, I did not want to exit abruptly, nor did Embry want me to because I specialized in creating trendy leather-culture feature articles not found in his files. After I exited, no one else went on location to write gonzo journalism of rodeos, prisons, and swimming meets. Jeanne Barney told me in 2006 that when she left *Drummer* in 1976, Embry owed her "...\$13,000, and Larry Townsend has even computed the interest on that."

If Embry had paid all of us, he might have been able to own his *Drummer* for twenty-four years. Instead, he cut off his nose to spite his face. As an LA businessman, he knew the cost but not the value of paying the workers who were the contributors and the in-house staff. He ruined his own reputation. The talent drain over time cost him his "beloved" *Drummer* in 1986.

Eight years after my exit, in a letter dated August 24, 1987, the still-enraged Embry, who had not been publisher of *Drummer* for a year, lied to the new *Drummer* publisher Tony DeBlase that Fritscher "still owes *Drummer* nine issues as editor-in-chief for which he was paid in full." Funny, he'd never mentioned that before. Among those who died laughing: Mapplethorpe (died 1989) and Sparrow (died 1992) and DeBlase (died 2000). When *Drummer* photographer David Sparrow died, Embry still owed him nearly one thousand dollars from thirteen years earlier. BDSM author Rick Leathers, who worked eleven years in Embry's mail-order office before and after he sold *Drummer*, wrote, "John never advanced a penny to anyone for anything."

Among the living, everybody, including DeBlase and Barney and Townsend, was guffawing at the suggestion that Embry would pay forward anything to anyone when he was so notoriously forever in arrears paying nearly everyone. At least, Embry remembered the amount was for around nine issues at \$400 monthly which would be the nearly \$4000 I had requested eight years earlier. I would happily delete this paragraph upon seeing the canceled checks.

Al Shapiro was not surprised that our pay was not forthcoming. In quiet protest, he had withheld his A. Jay cartoon strip *Harry Chess* from *Drummer* 29, page 24. He forced Embry—who had little graphic novel, or cartoon strip, backfill on file—to publish the full-page notice on page 24 that “Harry Chess and His Fugg Pals Are on Vacation...But Will Be Back in the Next Issue [if negotiations go well].”

Embry had turned slow-pay into no-pay. He claimed *Drummer* was always totally broke.

At that, I suggested he contact the Mafia.

His face nearly exploded.

I was not really kidding when I offered the advice: “Everyone knows the Mafia runs gay bars and gay publishing. The Mafia ran the Stonewall Inn. Mafia magazines make money. If you need the Mafia to keep *Drummer* going, here’s a dime. Call them.”

Embry looked at me in shock.

I wasn’t Pinocchio needing Geppetto to shout: “Save yourself!”

I wasn’t a puppet.

I was a real boy.

BREAKING UP IS HARD TO DO: CAN A GRUDGE BECOME A BLACKLIST?

The always calm, mild, and non-confrontational Al Shapiro quietly began packing up his art-director supplies, and he and I spent most of the next months exiting together, followed by a long list of talented friends. All during the sixty days of that autumn of 1979, *Drummer* seemed like the Eagles song, “Hotel California” where “you can check in but you can never leave.” Or you leave slowly, like “Harry Chess,” in bits and pieces the way *Drummer* itself had fled LA in a hundred carloads to move to San Francisco. Gay life was exactly like track after track of the album *Hotel California*: “New Kid in Town,” “Life in the Fast Lane,” and “Wasted Time.” It was the soundtrack of the Titanic 70s, and one of top-ten best-selling albums of the twentieth century. It played continuously in bars and baths and in our heads.

Recorded in late 1976, it was the perfect score for the three dramatic years, 1977-1979, when I was anchored into that leather-self-invention decade as editor-in-chief of *Drummer*. I could not resist honoring the Eagles' insight into the way we were. It was historically essential to quote the lyrics of "Hotel California" for the title of *Some Dance to Remember: A Memoir-Novel of San Francisco 1970-1982*.

Drummer 30 was my last official issue, although I also edited *Drummer* 31, 32, and 33 from which my byline and some of my work were removed.

Drummer 32 was Al Shapiro's last official issue.

In *Drummer* 33, Al Shapiro's name had also been replaced on the masthead, although, for historical accuracy, both his work and mine, as noted, ended inside *Drummer* 33.

A. Jay, who had been art director for *Queen's Quarterly* in the 1960s, immediately went on to his next successful career as art director for the famous "Dirty Frenchman" at Le Salon bookstore on Polk Street.

Real-estate entrepreneur Embry wasted no time launching a grudge against A. Jay who continued to draw his cartoon characters for Le Salon marketing brochures. Ever jealous, Embry immediately claimed ownership to the copyright of *Harry Chess*. A light laughter drifted like fog across the Bay.

In *Drummer* 34, the second issue after A. Jay's exit, Embry tried to make Al disappear the way he had subtracted Jeanne Barney and me after our exits in *Drummer* 11 and *Drummer* 30 respectively. With no shame, Embry, the claim jumper, deleted A. Jay's name from his own bylined cartoon strip when Embry dared publish four pages of Al's signature brainchild, *Harry Chess*. He trumpeted that he had cut a deal with *Queen's Quarterly* who, as Al explained in a threatened lawsuit against Embry, had no ownership over his cartoon strip which he had created, not as a paid worker, but as a freelance contributor, even while he was the *QQ* art director. At the moment of publishing this theft of intellectual property, Embry was liar-liar, pants on fire. Selling his ill-gotten gains to subscribers, he wrote the following big, fat, dialogue balloon, vengefully making no mention of the famous A. Jay, hoping the corporate bravado of his Alternate Publishing could steal away Al's rights so Embry could not only print the cartoon strip in *Drummer* but also exploit *Harry Chess* in its own special book.

HARRY CHESS. *Drummer* has made arrangements with *QQ* magazine for their complete collection of everybody's ideal American Boy, Harry Chess! It seems like a good idea to begin at the beginning of Harry's exciting history, and so we shall. These

installments, along with the more current ones that *Drummer* has published, will, with any luck, be put together into a book of the Complete Harry Chess...

On March 28, 1980, I wrote a letter to my LA friend Bob Johnson to whom I provided short erotic fiction. He had created a lucrative career packaging porno magazines for George Mavety at Modernismo Publishing in New Jersey:

Dear Bob, Dirt Time: John Embry, according to Al Shapiro (author/creator of *Harry Chess*) is threatening to sue Le Salon for bringing out Al's complete *Harry*. Al has a letter from *Queen's Quarterly* [the original publisher of the first installments of *Harry*] stating that he [Shapiro] remains the owner of the strip, and can produce his own version whenever. Meantime, it seems Embry has bought tear-sheets out of old *QQs* and is now running them in *Drummer* as if they are new work, even though the quality of repro is down several notches because of the genesis of the artwork. I recall your telling me how you smelled rats-around-the Embry-o when the Big *D* [*Drummer*] was still aborning in LA. You remember, of course, how Embry stiffed me. Ah, life. I'm glad our interconnections remain clear in this world of seeming cutthroats.

At the end of Al's life, just before AIDS blinded him, he penned for me his last drawing which I cherish to this day, as told in my "Obituary for Al Shapiro," *Drummer* 107 (August 1987).

Drummer 31 was the last *Drummer* issue published at 1730 Divisadero Street. As Al and I were finally ankling the joint, Embry announced that he was moving the office from the rented Divisadero Victorian to his newly purchased building South of Market at 15 Harriet Street whose garage, stuffed with back issues, already housed the boy-lesque *Stars Magazine* and its publisher Glenn Turner who was funded by Reuben Sturman, the "Father of the Adult Industry"—if not the godfather. Were the new digs conjured by an act of gay magic? Had the money come from Mafia investors? Would the move to South of Market cancel financial problems the way his moving from LA had kept *Drummer* one step ahead of the cops, the censors, the printers, and the talent asking for pay?

We had gifted Embry with a new concept of *Drummer* that would endure as the magazine's archetype of identity throughout the rest of the century. We had a hit on our hands. What was the matter with him? As Gertrude

Stein said of William Saroyan, “He cannot stand the weight of being great.” With his Blacklist, Embry became the greatest censor of *Drummer*.

CALLING THE NEXT EYEWITNESSES TO THE STAND:
ROBERT DAVOLT, STEVEN SAYLOR, RICK LEATHERS

In a 2000 interview at leatherweb.com, Robert Davolt testified to a truism that began with Embry’s ownership of *Drummer*:

Many people in town were pissed off at *Drummer* for various reasons (some of them pretty good reasons)....*Drummer* was ‘both revered and reviled....I...was dealing with some past baggage, some hostility, some criticism, and some doubts.

Steven Saylor (Aaron Travis), who after my exit worked as a fiction department editor for Embry under Rowberry, seemed to understand completely the madness Al Shapiro and I had endured. Saylor, regarding his own “take” on Embry’s next act at 15 Harriet Street *Drummer*, wrote in Scott O’Hara’s magazine, *Steam*:

Working at Alternate [Publishing aka *Drummer*] was alternately [*sic*] mind-boggling and mind-numbing—we were underpaid, disrespected and overstimulated on a daily basis—and John [Rowberry, Fritscher’s successor] was the eye of the hurricane. *Mediating between publisher John Embry and everyone else required extraordinary finesse, coupled with a will of iron.* [Italics added] (*Steam*, Volume 2 #1, Spring 1994, page 101)

Prolific journalist Rick Leathers (aka Mike Leathers aka Dane Leathers) began working at the *Drummer* office for Embry in 1980, and continued off and on for nineteen years in Embry’s employ at Alternate Publishing as Embry’s assistant and as one of the main contributors to Embry’s various magazines with essays such as his homomasculine series, “Leather in the 90s.”

Writing January 1, 2006, in his email essay about *Drummer* titled “That Was the Mag That Was,” Rick Leathers included history and allegations which were his own that:

While in a porn store in Little Rock in 1979, I’d picked up an odd mag called *Drummer* that tickled my frenzy. So I packed up and headed for California where the damn thing had been published.

After many adventures in San Diego's Marine shit-chutes, I wandered up to San Francisco and worked in a leather bar, then a leather shop, then for John Embry at *Drummer*. Jack Fritscher had taken Embry's soft-core mag and made it gritty (and saleable), but they had clashed too often, and Fritscher had departed just before I hired on. Embry was a self-defeating wacko with a monumental temper, but he had the cunning and the cash (plus the Mafia contacts) to keep cranking out issues (though always long past the deadlines). Problem was, with Fritscher gone, most of the mags were just that—dead lines, very dead. Embry gave *Drummer* form, but it needed Fritscher to add the content. The big gap was that Embry wanted campy humor, but Fritscher was focused on fleshing out a new word he had added to the English language—*homomascularity*: the display of manly attributes by men for other men.

Rick Leathers was correct about the content. Because of Embry's Blacklist, I could not offer early 1980s *Drummer* my evolving cycles of ongoing leather articles, gender-identity fiction, and fetish photography. So the substantial lot of my 1980s writing on leather and fetish was published by other editors in the emerging new vanilla magazines that liked to stir in the leather spice of a *Drummer*-style story. When my editor Bob Johnson flamed out on cocaine and died high in his apartment overlooking the Sunset Strip, John Rowberry, fired from *Drummer* by Embry, replaced Johnson at George Mavety's Modernismo Publishing. Duty-bound to package six magazines monthly for the gay-friendly Mavety who three months before the first issue of *Drummer* had founded *Mandate* magazine in March 1975, Rowberry bought around thirty of my virtual *Drummer* stories for Mavety magazines such as *Skin*, *Skinflicks*, *Uncut*, and *Inches*. Mavety, who reputedly fathered a dozen children, also founded dozens of gay magazines including *Playguy* and *Honcho* which Embry envied as his main competition. Mavety's Modernismo broke the embargo of Embry's Blacklist when, beginning in 1980, Johnson and then Rowberry published stories like my six-chapter novelization of the film *J. Brian's Flashbacks* in *Honcho* and my novella *Titanic* in *Uncut*. When Larry Townsend pulled his advice column published in *Drummer* from 1980-1992, he moved it to *Honcho* where it ran until four weeks before his death in 2008. The only thing Mavety and Embry had in common was their pornographer's zeal for turning magazine profits into real estate holdings.

Considering the undertow of Mafia and gay connections, I think of eleven years of tales of the City told me by my longtime best friend, the

native San Francisco Italian leather-guru, Tony Tavarossi (*Drummer* 131). He and I were intimate pals from 1970 to his death in 1981 when he was the first “leather star” personality to die of a mysterious illness no one could name. In the 1950s, he worked in Tenderloin drag bars, instinctively absorbing management skills. He soon attracted the attention of a Mafia guido, and even though he could not be “connected” like a “made man” because he was gay, he became a familiar. The mob flew him to New Jersey to assess a leather bar that had sprung up in New York. Like a good *paisan*, Tony flew back to the Tenderloin, and with discreet backing opened the first dedicated leather bar in San Francisco in 1962 (*Drummer* 131). He was twenty-eight and cool. To name his bar, he reversed the spelling of his first name, added a question mark, and dubbed his “mambo Italiano” pub Tony’s “YNOT?” aka “Why Not?” In 1961, an undercover cop entrapped Tony in his own bar, and the SFPD closed it down. Such victimization led immediately to the founding of San Francisco’s Tavern Guild to protect bar owners and patrons from harassment. Mob support benefitted Tony. His lesson was not lost on me. When I made my joke to Embry about calling the Mafia to fund *Drummer*, did I accidentally hit a sore spot?

Why did he react so explosively?

Was it because he wasn’t “connected,” or because he was?

His longtime employee and confidante, Frank Hatfield aka *Drummer* author Frank O’Rourke, who ran Embry’s mail-order business was a self-confessed ex-con who liked to brag of his long association, twenty years before, with Mafia boss Meyer Lansky in Miami and Havana before Fidel Castro seized Cuba and drove out the mob in 1959.

One must really consider: Was Embry Mafia?

The principle difference between the Mafia and Embry was that the Mafia was *organized* crime.

Glenn Turner, publisher of the chicken magazine *Stars*, who rented part of the Harriet Street *Drummer* building owned by Embry was alleged to be “connected.” Turner’s rumored racketeer ties may have been inevitable gossip in the modern gay world where tough young Mafia guidos have long been a hot urban sex fetish akin to the pastoral sex fetish of Sicilian teenagers romanticized by 19th and 20th-century gay photographers like Wilhelm von Gloeden and authors like E. M. Forster with his Italianate interests, and Tennessee Williams in *The Rose Tattoo* and *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*. That arty and literary crowd of sex tourists framed the 20th-century concept of Italian hustlers on the down low as smouldering sex objects igniting gay erotic fantasies. In England, Evelyn Waugh’s friend, the writer Sir Harold Acton glamorized the lubricious appeal of Sicilian sexuality and the

romancing of guidos when he stated that “Taormina is a polite synonym for Sodom.” In the 1930s, Italian dictator Benito Mussolini, calling this erotic stereotype of young Italian males “pornography,” sent his Fascist police to destroy von Gloeden’s glass negatives in much the same way as Senator Jesse Helms tried to destroy the photographs of the most famous leatherman who ever lived, Robert Mapplethorpe.

In the controversial crime drama *Flipping* (1997), a handsome undercover cop falls for the muscular wise guy he meets in a toilet. This very *Drummer* plot builds on dramatic gay-and-Mafia “archetypes” rather than cop-and-gangster “stereotypes.” It reveals the psychology of homomale love in the male world of back-slapping Mafiosi. The film itself was for a long time unavailable because of a scandal reported to be about its funding and distribution which was a mob-style way of censoring the gay guido storyline.

The Mafia have played an erotic shadow show inside gay culture for more than a century. The Genovese Family owned the Stonewall Inn which was managed by Matty “The Horse” Ianniello who was the Boss of the West Side. He made cash money off “lewd and lascivious” gay behavior and paid off the NYPD for that privilege until cops, not on the take, busted the bar looking for evidence of mob activity. In the perspective of that June 27-28, 1969, raid, gays were, to both the cops and the mob, merely collateral damage—until the patrons seized the moment to strike back against police brutality.

From 1976-1985, the mob ran the legendary Mineshaft bar which, because of the sensational torture-murder of several patrons, figured dramatically in the leather-guido plot of the gay film, *Cruising*, directed by William Friedkin who said of Ianniello:

He was a guy I knew.... Virtually every business on the West Side of New York was either owned or partially owned by him or paying him protection. I asked him if I could film in the clubs. I went down there and saw a number of people I knew and they allowed me to film. They had no problems with me filming in there with Al Pacino.” (“The Queerty Interview of William Friedkin” by Jeremy Kinser, Queerty.com, June 16, 2015)

In my historical story titled “Stonewall, June 27, 1969, 11 PM,” the drag queens brag about Mafia sex inside the Stonewall bar. The quotation is from the *Harrington Gay Men’s Fiction Quarterly*, Volume 8, Issue 1:

“This place [the Stonewall Inn] only looks like a gay bar. It’s really an eye-talian bar.”

Norma Dessun has a secret taste for linguça sausage which she indulges starting late one night—early last spring—when the lone guido closing the bar, like, leans back against the cash register and unzips his black gabardine slacks which causes Norma’s knees to grow so weak she takes the uncut invitation deep down her throat and hums thirty bars of “Come Back to Sorrento.”

The guido’s shirt hangs open by three buttons. Around his neck, a gold chain rests in the tangle of thick black hair on his pumped chest. Hot enough himself he’s made hotter by the thought of the powerful anonymous interests he works for.

It isn’t so much that the guido lies and tells Norma he’ll tap her head before he cums (in her mouth) that disturbs Norma.

It’s more the gun that Norma’s fingers feel strapped to the husky guido’s right calf that cautions her to barely mention what was for some weeks an unspoken date that always ended (“Mambo Siciliano”) with the guido getting off squeezing Norma’s cheeks to make sure she swallows his eye-talian ice.

“That’s his trip,” Norma says. “I tell him, I don’t know who you work for, but I know *you*.”

In leather fantasy, swarthy Mafiosi are objects of S&M desire. One of the best of my Palm Drive models re-named himself “Donnie Russo,” because he wanted to assume the erotic identity of “a guido in a wife-beater tank top” in my videos *Homme Alone* and *Rough Night at the Jockstrap Gym*. The Jersey Shore image he cultivated had long fit into gay culture as a fetish category of muscular Mafiosi in suits with guns and cigars and baseball bats. In the 1990s, as Francis Ford Coppola resurrected his 1970s Oscar-winning franchise with *Godfather III*, I helped Russo resurrect the 1970s gay fascination with Robert DeNiro in a wife-beater playing the sexy young Don Corleone (*Godfather II*, 1974) as well as the Sicilian-American boxer, Jake LaMotta (*Raging Bull*, 1980) who threw a fight to gain favor with the Mafia. My erotic documentary photographs of Donnie Russo were published on the cover and inside pages of *Drummer* 170 (December 1993); in the British coffee-table photobook *American Men*, pages 1, 14, 15, and 21 (1995); and on the cover of *Eagle Magazine*, issue 4 (July 1996), published by Dave Rhodes, founder of *The Leather Journal*.

In this Mafia helix, I remember quite clearly that in 1981, Mapplethorpe photographed the homosexual crook, Roy Cohn, who as an anti-gay Fascist

in the 1950s worked as HUAC pit bull for the hate-filled Republican Senator Joe McCarthy. Through the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, the Jewish Cohn worked as a lawyer for the Italian Mafia and the Roman Catholic Church. Tony Kushner dramatized the homophobic queer Cohn, who died of AIDS in 1986, in *Angels in America*.

APPENDIX

The Difference Between the Italian Mafia and the Leather Family

Tony Tavarossi and Chuck Renslow

1

Star Bartender: Tony Tavarossi

by Jack Fritscher

Bay Area Reporter, BARTab, May 2011, page 30

Born to be a bar star in the Mission District (1933-1981), Tony Tavarossi came out at age twelve giving blow jobs under the tables in the curtained booths of the South China Café at 4133 18th Street and Castro, next door to 4127 18th which, sixty-five years later, would become the GLBT Historical Society museum. It was war's end: 1945. San Francisco surged with carousing soldiers and sailors. As a rebellious Catholic boy, Tony relished being a Sagittarius archer hunting masculine wild things. Cruising waterfront bars that would soon be demolished for the new Embarcadero Freeway, teenager Tony became a one-man USO, learning a lesson on his knees about entertaining the troops.

Long before turning 21, he worked bars in the 1950s Tenderloin, instinctively absorbing management skills and attracting the attention of a Mafia guido who squired him in 1961 to fly to New York to see if the rapidly masculinizing “hard” bars might translate to lyrical San Francisco. Not “connected” because he was gay, Tony was nevertheless an Italian with “backing.” He reckoned that the new bar concept would travel. Popularly known for his BDSM games, particularly his role in popularizing fisting, his bar ideas were commercial extensions of private sexuality: performance stages where players could both lose and find themselves in backroom gloryholes with slings. So in 1962, age 28, coding his name backwards, he became the “owner” of San Francisco’s first dedicated leather bar “Tony’s

Why Not?” at 517 Ellis in the Tenderloin. Within six months in 1962, the SFPD closed the Why Not? when Tony himself was entrapped in his own bar. That arrest, contributing to the founding of the Tavern Guild (1962), made him, like Jose Sarria, a popular local personality years before the rebellions at Compton’s Cafeteria (1966) and Stonewall (1969).

San Francisco was awakening. North of Market Street, the neon Tenderloin was too policed. South of Market, the dark industrial area looked outlaw. The leather crowd migrated from NoMa to SoMa. In 1962, having promised sex-tourist Chuck Arnett a job during the run of the Why Not?, Tony found him other work when in 1963 the Louisiana-born Arnett returned to San Francisco. Expert at networking, Tony steered him forward to a creative job at the Tool Box. Having apprenticed under leather artist Etienne at Chuck Renslow’s Gold Coast bar, Arnett debuted by painting his iconic mural and became the star artist of Folsom Street even as Tony became a star serving on the creative crews of nearly every bar and bath South of Market in the Swingin’ 1960s and Titanic 1970s.

With other players crashing in the hippie-leather flat over the Stud bar near Febe’s, Arnett imported the psychedelic drugs of the Haight-Ashbury to Folsom Street. During the sex wars of gay lib, bartenders often prescribed the recreational medication needed to survive the battles. Dispensing purposed party favors in bars, Chuck and Tony and their friend Jack Haines introduced fisting as a new sport. According to eyewitness bar stories, Tony had been one of the first men fisted in recorded modern times. In fact, he told me that in 1960, two Marines had hung him upside down in a shower in an Oceanside motel and plunged on in through his cherry. By 1963, Jack and Tony were hosting fisting parties at 111 Gilbert Street in a SoMa warehouse where Jack’s father cleaned and restored used refrigerators and stoves. By 1974, Tony was tutoring newcomer Steve McEachern who opened his legendary Catacombs fisting palace in May 1975. In 1977, I shot Super-8 films of Tony fisting a bottom tied butt-up in the wooden stocks in room 226 at the Slot. Folsom Street sexuality rode on Tony’s fist and forearm. In the free spirit of the times, he liked nothing better than seducing “virgins” into anything they had never done before.

In 1978 when the SFPD asked me as the editor of *Drummer* to take the current crop of police rookies on a “freshman orientation” tour of Folsom Street, I arranged with Tony to give them some sensitivity training at the Slot Hotel. When Tony on the loudspeaker announced as a courtesy that the expected police were in the house, the doors of nearly every room opened fast and wide with exhibitionist leather twosomes and threesomes competing to be outrageous. Halfway through the fifteen-minute tour, one of the

young cops swooned and his buddies carried him to the lobby to revive him, but when he came to, he was still in the Slot and Tony was holding a wet cloth to his face, and he fainted again to much laughter.

For eleven years (1970-1981), Tony and I were friends and sex playmates. I adored Tony's allure. At a swarthy 5-5, 130 pounds, uncut, he was a bearded Sicilian Pan without limits. His natural sensuality was rooted in his infancy thanks to his mother who soothed his sweet temperament by rubbing olive oil circles slowly between his cock and his beautiful Italian foreskin. Living in a scrupulously clean apartment with a wild playroom at 288 Central Avenue at Oak Street, he was a bottom specializing in "topping tops to renew them" as long as they at least tried to top his redoubtable rear in return: fist for fist. That bar-culture cover story "saved face" for his tricks and made him the most popular bartender in town. His tip jars overflowed. Apace with Gertrude Stein, his apartment was filled with drawings, paintings, and photographs from the salon of his creative friends, and from his erotic fans. Lou Rudolph, who was famous for sketching men in Folsom bars, often inked Tony on his large archival watercolor pads.

Tony was a sweet, romantic man, unspoiled by American education. At our first meeting in 1970, he frightened me, the teacher, because he was six years older and was far more pagan, street smart, and sexually sophisticated. I was ashamed that I noticed he was from the underclass and I was middle-class. It took nearly six months of watching him as a bartender beloved in public spaces for me to get over my class consciousness and surrender to his Dionysian style of primal sex. Savvy bartenders always know what's new and what's next, and Tony tutored generations of bar workers during his thirty years of active service. His imprint may still be felt.

After four years of playing together and learning each other's transcendental turn-ons, he wrote me a love note which he hand delivered. In all its longing sincerity, the note reads as if he were channeling Chaucer, with his choice spellings and initial capitalizations, from a wilder "medieval" past. Why not toy with some over-thinking of the reincarnation Tony believed in? From 1967 onwards, bar jukeboxes played Procul Harum quoting the "Miller's Tale" in "A Whiter Shade of Pale." And wasn't Harry Bailey, the host in *The Canterbury Tales*, a bartender? No wonder that Edward III rewarded Chaucer "with a gallon of wine daily for the rest of his life."

Something To Think about;
I would like to have you see me in pain!
Having you see me, and hereing me in Pain.
To see the sweet balls Pop all over me, and

to smell the Pain grow in me more, and more.
 Mouth should drink from your juice cock, and
 see you sit on my mouth as I ake in Pane.
 Having my tongue dig in to you
 as you show more parts of me to feel you.
 Your ass should muffel my crys, and
 having me suck on your ass hole and
 when my cock sit up and hard,
 Your hands and mine will Tuch my sole and
 dance on my braine and you will know
 that I am a brother of Pain and
 you are the giver of Pain. And
 in that I will show you my love of you and
 Please you if you let me.
 —Tony

In 1981, the fabled Barracks baths burned down slamming the Titanic 1970s to symbolic close. Tony had worked at the Barracks and its Red Star Saloon. Collapsing with shingles and shigella, he had been admitted to San Francisco General where I visited him in ICU. Unable to speak, he was alert. Because one Barracks manager had crossed him, I tried cheering him with the karma he loved: “The Barracks burned down yesterday. It’s the end of an era.” Reaching for pencil and paper, he scrawled, “Good.” In the hall, I asked his doctor, “What’s wrong with him?” She said, “We don’t know. We’ve never seen a patient so distressed.” No one had yet heard of AIDS. Tony Tavarossi died the next day, July 12, 1981. He was loved. His funeral was enormous.

In 2010 when the San Francisco Planning Commission queried me for suggestions about recognizing and protecting the GLBTQ social heritage of South of Market, I recommended that a street might be named to honor Tony Tavarossi who for all the Folsom fun and games was one of those bartenders who are front-line inventors and caretakers of gay society. His name, and the names of the other SoMa friends I nominated, such as Anthony DeBlase, Thom Gunn, Robert Opel, Mister Marcus, Ron Johnson, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Hank Diethelm, were included in the booklet published by the Western SoMa Task Citizens Planning Task Force, *Recognizing, Protecting and Memorializing South of Market LGBTQ Social Heritage Neighborhood Resources*, March 2010.

2

Who's Your Big Daddy?**Chuck Renslow**

by Jack Fritscher

Bay Area Reporter, June 9-15, 2011, page 37***Leatherman: The Legend of Chuck Renslow*****by Tracy Baim and Owen Keehnen, Prairie Avenue Productions, 300 Illustrations, \$24.99**

In *Casablanca*, “Sooner or later everybody comes to Rick’s.” In Chicago, the world comes to Chuck’s. Since 1950, Chuck Renslow, now 82, and one of the most famous gay men on the planet, has safely hosted thousands of GLBT visitors at his thirty venues from his legendary Gold Coast bar (1960-88), to his International Mr. Leather Contest (1979), and his prestigious Leather Archives & Museum (1991). For sixty years, Renslow, a politically aggressive Democrat in the Chicago Machine, has been a person of interest to cops, politicians, fans, and frenemies.

Rather than review *Leatherman*, I can best, as a SoMa historian, serve as local tour guide to this bespoke book with its candid backstage drama of leathermen, lesbians, and Mafia wise-guys shaping homoculture two decades before Stonewall. I came out on Renslow’s 1950s Kris Studio photography and his Gold Coast where, beginning a ten-year union, I married his handsome bartender, photographer David Sparrow. As eyewitness, I appreciate the authenticity of *Leatherman* into which my two-bits was invited by leather-village griots Owen Keehnen and Tracy Baim.

Renslow’s strategic business mind led gays politically into a new age. He saw first what others only saw eventually. As an occult practitioner of magical thinking, he intuited the private necessity of coming out, and the public necessity of founding safe venues to do it. Starting Kris Studio (1953), he first courted homomale men by creating butch social destinations which he eventually diversified to all genders: his 2010 IML winner was FTM wheel-charioteer Tyler McCormick. Pioneering locally, he built a nationally sustainable model proving gay-owned businesses key to building community, politics, and social networks. Born a year before Harvey Milk, and politically active twenty years before Milk hit Castro, Chicago-native Renslow evolved an early 1950s heartland leathersex identity that defied city, state, and federal laws.

In 1954, with lifelong muse, Dom Orejudos, the artist “Etienne,” he

bought Triumph gym, photographed musclemen, created magazines, was busted by the Post Office for mailing obscene material, and helped push toward the Supreme Court decision that frontal nudity could be sent via US mail. Without that 1967 ruling, subscription mailing of 1970s sex-identity publications could not have reached readers, and *Drummer* would never have become San Francisco's longest-running gay magazine.

Synergizing business with art, Renslow's pre-Stonewall Chicago style, driven by his can-do "Renslow Family," helped stimulate San Francisco's 1970s immigrant boom. For instance, Etienne, Renslow's esthetician, painted the Gold Coast walls re-conceptualizing bars as galleries, beginning the Muralist Movement whose "Rushmore Four" included Tom of Finland, *Drummer* art director A. Jay, and SoMa's Chuck Arnett whom Robert Opel and I dubbed *Drummer's* "Lautrec in Leather." In 1962, Etienne tutored Arnett who, speeding off to San Francisco, painted his avatar mural at the Tool Box. When *Life* magazine pictured that mural, five years before Stonewall, it invited gays nationwide to bring all regional lifestyles to melt in San Francisco's pot.

Within the extended Renslow Family, B.A.R. columnist Mister Marcus regularly alerted western readers to Renslow's Midwestern entertainments from his annual White Party to Castro diva Sylvester singing on Renslow's "K-Y Circuit" stages. As an IML judge for 28 years, Marcus flew to O'Hare with San Francisco entourages, often including Folsom's divine IML emcee Queen Cougar. Always, folks returned to SFO energized in local activism by the annual leather-family reunion that is IML. After winning "Mr. IML 1985," San Francisco's Patrick Toner, using that celebrity, established the AIDS fund-raiser, the Dore Alley Fair. In 1991, Renslow and Anthony DeBlase, the San Francisco publisher of *Drummer*, and creator of the Leather Pride Flag, founded the IML Trust-funded Leather Archives & Museum with Joseph Bean, editor of San Francisco's *Bear* magazine, as executive director.

In 1978, creating SoMa's first gallery, Oscar stalker Robert Opel chose veterans Etienne and A. Jay to launch Fey-Way Studio's opening exhibit featuring emerging talent like Robert Mapplethorpe who told me, when assigning him his first magazine cover (*Drummer* 24), how his own 1970s photography was influenced by the 1950s beefcake of Renslow who was "genius at lighting his models."

Becoming *Drummer* editor, I purposely injected Renslow's masculine, but not separatist, heartland values into the founding of that magazine that helped create the very San Francisco leather culture it reported on. *Drummer* 9 featured the "Gold Coast 15th Anniversary," and, imitating Renslow's

first IML, *Drummer* kick-started the Mr. Drummer Contest which soon anchored the Folsom Fair. In 1980, Renslow's business manager Patrick Batt moved to San Francisco, helped Bob Damron found the Eagle bar, and became business manager of *Drummer* during our editorial shift to safe sex.

Forthrightly, *Leatherman* dares dish dirt, such as how the rift between thwarted S&M lovers Renslow and Sam Steward, both filmed separately by Kinsey, caused Steward to move his Chicago tattoo parlor to Oakland (1964), establishing Steward as famous San Francisco author "Phil Andros." And those are just some local GPS links to this entertaining documentary about 20th-century gay American history.

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