

*Leather-Folk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice*  
Mark Thompson, Editor

**Artist Chuck Arnett: His Life/Our Times**  
**by Jack Fritscher**

“Jack Fritscher was the first person to point out the June 26, 1964 issue of *Life* Magazine as a bench-mark in the history of gay culture. The point, now a reference to many, was made in his ‘Rear View Mirror’ history column in *Drummer* 134, October 1989.” — Mark Hemry, editor

What collector of gay art can forget the famous 1970 Red Star Saloon poster of one man fisting another on a toilet? Over their heads, written like graffiti in the sky with diamonds, hangs the purposely misspelled challenge: “IF YOUR MAN ENOUGH!”

The Red Star was the bar fronting the Barracks on Folsom at Hallam. Men, who were man enough, drank 25-cent beer, kicked sawdust, cracked peanuts from barrels, and cruised while waiting for their acid to come on. The back door of the Red Star led straight into the Barracks. The year was 1972 and the Golden Age of Gay Liberation was celebrating sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll!

Tourists to SFO one summer were residents by the next. Golden Age sex put many a Midwestern career in law, medicine, teaching, and business on hold. Man-to-man sex was a siren call. Scott McKenzie singing “If You’re Goin’ to San Francisco, Wear Flowers in Your Hair” was the mild side. Chuck Arnett, with the seductive agitprop art of his “recruiting” posters, was the wild side. He inked, chalked, and painted men’s wildest fantasies. He gave men the raw images of their ids at play.

**Posters of revolution**

The brightest and best could hardly have known that the Golden Age, 1969-1982, would last little more than a decade. Few of the innocents living the golden life asked any more questions than Auntie Mame. “Be here now” was the correct philosophy: seizing the day and inventing the nights of sport fucking, handballing, and leather-fetish S/M. Sexual revolution uncloseted more than the horizontal hula.

Every revolution has its graphic art and artists.

The reclusive Tom of Finland fine-lined idealized dream images of polite romance. Sex-activist Chuck Arnett posterized a militant edge to hard-balling sleaze. Arnett, though less prolific than the venerable Tom, called sex warriors to the fisted front lines of masculine liberation. His action art, literally propagandizing “DO IT!,” was the raw style usually scrawled with anonymous honesty on toilet walls. Like the later Keith Haring, Arnett’s style looked deceptively like graffiti anyone could do.

**Art versus prejudice**

Arnett was Rousseau’s noble savage set on destroying prejudicial stereotypes of male, masculine-identified homosexuals. (The uncloseting of lesbians was ticking on a different clock in the ‘60s and early ‘70s.) Born south of the Manson/ Mason/Dixon/Nixon line in Louisiana, February 15, 1928, Arnett grew up in a world far different from the world post-Stonewall. When he painted on the Lascaux stone wall of the Tool Box the pioneer mural

that was a photo-op pop-shot heard round the world, he liberated homosexuals into a new image. *Life* magazine could neither ignore nor resist the butch gauntlet Arnett threw down.

### **That watershed issue of *Life***

Arnett threw a party and *Life* sent out the invitations. On June 26, 1964, *Life* magazine published an image-liberating historical issue that was read across the nation as an invitation to come to San Francisco and be a man's man.

Thousands of queers in small towns who thought that they were the only faggots in the world and, worse, thought that all faggots were queenly — having taken into their souls the Sex-Barbie stereotype straights had crammed down their throats — suddenly saw, compliments of *Life*, that there was an alternative homomale style.

Non-nelly faggots breathed a sigh of relief. In that one provocative issue of *Life* was an "Emancipation Proclamation" for the genuinely male-identified homosexual. Queers are like toupees. "For every obvious homosexual," *Life* drooled, "there are probably nine nearly impossible to detect."

Long before the gay press was "legal," and even longer before a leather press was conceived, *Life* had discovered the Art and Lifestyle boom that something butch this way comes demanding civil rights. What a shock to American culture: Sissies weren't the only fags. The respectable *Life* tried to clear away myths and misconceptions about homosexuality.

How the straight media interprets us influences our perceptions of ourselves.

"San Francisco," *Life* proclaimed, "is the gay capital." That capital life pivoted around thirty bars and cocktail lounges. Many young men, raised in families that never frequented bars, at first found the bar style a negative entry to gay life. The bars, fiercely competitive, with a life expectancy of eighteen months, had to offer more than alcohol and drag shows.

Some bars were built around the cult of personality such as Jose Sarria, the operatic drag who was the self-styled Dowager Queen of the City. Sarria ran for supervisor in 1961 and polled nearly six thousand votes. Arnett, responsive to diversity, created a high-concept alternative for men who preferred men male. He was a hit. Without naming the formidable Arnett as a singular cult personality, *Life* panted on about Arnett's environmental sculpture, the Tool Box.

The Tool Box was more than a bar in San Francisco.

It was "Temple One" in Mecca.

No longer did men have to use the cruising code one-liner "Are you a friend of Dorothy?" to figure out if a male man was queer. Tony Bennett left his heart in San Francisco in 1961. *Life* by 1964 announced that San Francisco was Oz, and tin men and cowardly men and scaredy-cats knew where they could go to find their hearts, their smarts, and their courage.

### ***Life* levitates art**

"On another far-out fringe of the 'gay' world are the so-called S&M bars," *Life* oozed.

One of the most dramatic examples, the Tool Box, is in the warehouse district of San Francisco. Outside the entrance stand a few brightly polished motorcycles, including an occasional lavender [sic!] model. Inside the bar, the accent is on leather and sadistic symbolism. The walls are covered with murals of male-looking men in black leather jackets. A metal collage of motorcycle parts hangs on one wall. A cluster of tennis shoes — favorite footwear for many homosexuals with feminine traits — dangles from the ceiling. Behind it a derisive sign reads: "Down with Sneakers!"

“This is the antifeminine side of homosexuality,” says Bill Ruquy, part owner of the bar. “We throw out anybody who is too swishy. If one is going to be homosexual, why have anything to do with women of either sex? We don’t go for giddy kids.”

Ruquy, politically correct for his time, demonstrates how fickle PC-ness is.

Metal is much in evidence in the room: chains on the wall, the bunches of keys hanging from the customers’ leather belts. “That’s part of the sadistic business,” Ruquy explains. “We used to wear chains on our shoulders. Now the keys are in.”

As women know, to end oppression the oppressed must initially appear strong, tough, and militant to scare the oppressors’ horses.

“The effort of these homosexuals,” *Life* judged,

to appear manly is obsessive — in the rakish angle of the caps, in the thumbs boldly hooked in belts. Ruquy says, “This is a place for men, a place without all those screaming faggots, fuzzy sweaters, and sneakers. Those guys — the ones you see in the other bars — are afraid of us. They’re afraid to come here because everything looks tough. But we’re probably the most genteel bar in town.”

*Life*: “The hostility of the minority ‘leather’ crowd toward the rest of the ‘gay’ world is exceeded by the bitterness of individual homosexuals toward the ‘straight’ public.” From such publicity came strength in numbers. *Life* warned straight up that homos were ready to explode in a fight for civil rights.

From *Life* to Stonewall was only five years, almost to the day: June 26, 1964, to June 29, 1969.

Arnett, the former New York stage designer, had done something right creating the set of the Tool Box. The *Life* article, for all its hissy rectitude, sensing something politically fresh, seethes with as much approving lust as it thinks its readers, still reeling from JFK’s assassination seven months earlier, would tolerate.

### **Kinsey, McCarthy, and Arnett**

In 1948, when Chuck Arnett was twenty, the anti-Freudian Kinsey Report, thanks to the input of Sam Steward, shocked the United States: 50 percent of boys engage in homosexual activity, and the more masculine and aggressive the boy the more likely he is to experiment with homosexuality.

When Arnett was twenty-five, and already a dancer and choreographer in New York, Senator Joe McCarthy had teamed with Dick Nixon and the House Un-American Activities Committee to blacklist as commie-pinkos everyone who was anyone in Hollywood, and the Republican prez Ike Eisenhower, mixing church with state, had signed an executive order (1953) legislating morality: Homosexuality was an absolute bar to any federal security clearance.

The Department of Defense rejected homosexuals “because of a weakness of moral fiber.” The American Civil Liberties Union said the DOD was “acting like Big Brother.” The ACLU had been called in to defend the Mattachine Society, which, founded in 1950, was the first lasting homosexual group in America, the land of personal liberty and free choice, to seek gay rights in federal agencies.

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“One, Incorporated,” founded in 1952, published *One* magazine, the first periodical of the modern American gay press.

The sexual-preference situation comedy was not lost on Arnett, who knew Theater of the Absurd when he saw it.

In 1957, many legal and religious groups sought tolerance for homosexuals based on the findings of the British *Wolfenden Report*.

In 1963, a pamphlet called *Toward a Quaker View of Sex* said that society “should no more deplore homosexuality than lefthandness ... Homosexual affection can be as selfless as heterosexual affection and therefore we cannot see that it is in some way morally worse.” Gay ’70s lives proved that. Gay ’80s lives validated it again.

Catholics, *mais oui*, in the book *Counseling the Catholic*, said, along with the American Psychiatric Association (which changed its view in 1972), that homosexuals are sick.

One should note, especially in the fractious ’90s, that just because the American Psychiatric Association declared that homosexuality itself was not a sickness doesn’t mean that individual homosexuals or lesbians can’t be mentally ill, emotionally disturbed, or socially dysfunctional — just like straight people.

Arnett, frolicking about in the Beatnik Bongo Years, knew homosexuals were “sick,” and he celebrated “sickness” in an era when to be “sick” was to be cool, clever, brash, insulting, and outrageous. In 1957, the first of the “sick” greeting cards and stand-up comedians appeared, shocking America with their insults and “sick” jokes.

Until 1964, when Dade County, Florida (where else?), passed laws against homosexuality, there were no laws in the United States against being homosexual *per se*. What sex laws there were proscribed only specific acts which do not result in procreating. (Can you say “procreational chauvinism,” boys and girls?) Dade County justified its laws because “homosexuals are hungry for youth.” (Actually, the U.S. military is hungry for youth.) In 1961, Illinois took a major progressive stand, legislating that private acts between consenting adults were legal.

Against such social and moral debate, Chuck Arnett, mature enough to be among the first of the Founding Daddies, bridled at the absurdity of consenting adult homosexuals’ being convicted as sex offenders the same as rapists.

In 1963, undercover Los Angeles cops in neo-Keystone tight pants, sneakers, and sweaters entrapped and arrested 3,069 men, who were, according to L.A. Police Inspector James Fisk, only a “token number” of deviates.

In 1975, these same L.A. cops, under Police Chief Ed Davis, attacked the freedom of the gay press. They busted the *Drummer* “Slave Auction,” a fund-raising charity event they believed was a ring of white slavery run by the then brand-new leather magazine which became Arnett’s chief champion.

The cops, shopping for their 1963 Entrapment-A-Go-Go drag, obviously thought all homosexuals were swishes in sweaters. In the first summer of the emerging Beatles and the last summer of Camelot, Arnett, mad in the way all artists are mad with vision, set out to liberate the homomasculine image.

When he created the Tool Box, he was a man ahead of his time. Hippies were yet to come to flower in the Haight-Ashbury, from which neighborhood, shortly, the smell of incense and pot would be blowin’ in the ’60s’ wind down toward Folsom Street, where peace, love, and granola would mix with hard leather, hard drugs, and hard sex.

***Bye Bye, Birdie***

Chuck Arnett was a true eclectic. In his life, he absorbed with a voracious sexual-esthetic appetite everything he had seen and everyone he had met. He had the artist's visionary ability to challenge the "received taste" of straight prejudice and sissy myth. His art, celebratory of primal male sex, is, like the Theater of Cruelty which flourished in the early '60s, Art of Assault. After all, if art doesn't liberate and change you, it isn't art; it's entertainment.

Arnett is to leather nightlife on Folsom what Harvey Milk is to daytime politics: one of those persons who generously sums up everything for nearly everyone in the free expression of his own stunning identity.

In 1962, Arnett arrived in San Francisco as the lead dancer in the touring company of *Bye-Bye, Birdie*. He saw San Francisco for what it is: a wide-open fishing village with an opera. Like Harvey Milk, Arnett was an attuned New Yorker blown out west like Dotty to Oz. Both men took hold of the laid-back California style and kicked it into Manhattanized high gear — something native San Franciscans can never forgive either of them.

But kick-ass visionaries don't ask for, or need, forgiveness when, visionary and obsessed, they decide to act up and act out their truth. Gays of the '70s, in the clarity of their decade, should not be judged by retro-revisionists who want to recodify history according to their current PC norms, which, next decade, next century, will appear equally retro.

Arnett, dancer and choreographer, stage designer and painter, was foremost a creature of the night. A born exhibitionist, his nights at the baths where he appeared as "The Man Parents Warn Kids About" were performance art.

We met *a deux* in May 1970.

Chuck Arnett was a personage, a star, an icon.

Fame-fuckers sought him out.

He was the Candy Man.

Arnett was the man who introduced the needle to Folsom Street.

He was seductive with drugs, but he was cool enough to understand *no* without ending the friendship.

Post-Nancy Regan moralizing aside, the Golden Age of Liberation was a time when recreational, mind-expanding drugs were *de rigueur*. He was what he was when we were all the way we were: a revolutionary character. His lifelines, like the lines of his art, were jagged, speedy, hallucinatorily impressionistic, yet awash with a sensuality of masculine form and sweaty color.

### **Pioneer SOMA artist**

Arnett, as performance artist, thrived on the seduction of eager players into his performances. Born in the rebel South, he came from the New York of Broadway, Warhol, the Velvet Underground, and the experimental films of the Kuchar brothers and Kenneth Anger, by way of the Hollywood imprint of the wild one, Marlon Brando. Arnett was a master manipulator of media: incoming and outgoing. He was the master sex performer in person. He was What-Was-Happening in the Drop-Out/Turn-On/Be-In happenings staged nightly at the psychedelic baths.

At a heated point in the civil rights of male erotic history, Arnett brought, through his art and personality, what was simmering in the sexual aesthetic of the masculine American homosexual up to boil. When Brando pulled on a leather jacket and when Arnett created his sexually outrageous art, men suddenly saw the masculine-identified way they had to be, because in their secret hearts they recognized they already were that way.

Theatrical through and through, Arnett made South of Market his studio back lot. He was the Pioneer Artist, the first to exhibit his art, in the then-rough SOMA. He led the way for REX, Tom of Finland, and Mapplethorpe to show at 1974's Academy Awards streaker Robert Opel's Fey Way Gallery. Arnett, with a social consciousness honed in the 1930s and sophisticated in the 1950s, was, by the 1960s, ready, willing, and able to turn the high beam of his talent on his Archetypal Leather Bar project.

If an artist can objectify his own personality within his creation, then the Tool Box was, in fact, Chuck Arnett, not himself singly, but himself as an amalgam of many men thinking and feeling similarly, but less able in those queerbashing times to express themselves graphically. If gay men are their own best creation, then without Arnett's leading the way and opening the door of the Tool Box, they may have wandered, guideless, all dressed up with no place to go, and the glorious decade of the '70s in San Francisco might not have been so different from New York and Los Angeles.

But it was, Blanche. It was.

Too bad AIDS paranoia in the reactive '80s so bashed the high gay culture of the '70s which bonded men the way serving in-country in Vietnam bonded soldiers. Arnett in 1986 spoke for many '70s veterans of the sexual liberation front when he said about the young turks of the '80s: "They're so fucking righteous. They're ingrates. We created them. Fuck 'em."

### **Mural as politics**

Muralists tend to be political, and muralist Arnett was political according to his time. His painting was a radical act created before anyone ever dared imagine gays as a political force. Masculine homosexuals? Even in the 1990s such a concept strikes chords of terror and disbelief in the male-bashing KVeens of Divadom. Arnett's New Sex Icons broke the prejudicial stereotype. With paintbrush in hand, he powered up his fist against homophobia and endorsed the Jungian animus.

In that one grand sweep, he set the radical, rebellious tone south of Market. He changed the way faggots looked at themselves. He changed Marlon Brando and James Dean into archetypal black silhouettes, new Rorschach images of bikers and musclemen and athletes and construction workers, against which men, standing, cruising, beer bottle in hand, could re-assess and validate animus images of themselves and their multiple, polymorphously perverse partners.

Arnett, a gentleman from the American South, never glamorized rednecks or redneckerie. His homomale men were not stereotypes of the worst of what males do when males act their stereotypical worst. Arnett made it possible to be manly, even "crude," without being insensitive or rude.

Arnett's clarion mural, double-trucked across two *Life* pages, signaled a new image of male homosexuals. Arnett was, in fact, a fan of Walt Whitman's variety of males celebrated in *Leaves of Grass*. That classic Tool Box issue of *Life* started the migration to San Francisco that caused both South of Market and Castro to happen. Arnett, like some lusty Moses, parted the Red Sea and wandering, isolated homosexual refugees from all across the U.S. came in from the cold diaspora to the warmth of a community being born.

That's American pop culture. A movie yesterday. A mural today. A life-style tomorrow.

### **Legend and legacy**

Chuck Arnett lived lowlife to the hilt. Once he had set his Folsom Juggernaut in motion, he turned his awesome primitive talent to sketching gut-wrenching sex scenes. His disciplined

genius, more inspired than impaired by drugs, evinced immediate response with each new creation.

He was in demand as a commercial artist for new bars and baths. His poster work was immediately collectible. Magazines, particularly *Drummer*, sought his illustrations. His acid-abstract style suggested worlds of wonder.

The man knew sex.

The artist illustrated it.

Arnett was a celebrity on the set of the Folsom movie he had storyboarded on the wall of the Tool Box.

Where the private Arnett fuses into the public Arnett, reality converges with myth. Arnett, personally, was quiet, unassuming, anonymous. In his later years, he was a grizzled man of stark flesh and bone, who sat oftentimes alone in the nonworking sauna at the Barracks. To a new generation in the late '70s, to whom he had given a New-Sex world, he was no longer a famous face. His fabled reputation grew ironically larger as he shrank physically with time. His fame had turned his name into an image larger than any human person could maintain.

His art was the stuff of glorious sketches on Pompeiian ruins. He suffered the fate of all great artists who don't share with Byron, Shelley, Keats, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, James Dean, Marilyn, Mapplethorpe, and Keith Haring, the romantic luxury of death at an early age.

His legend and legacy, even in his life, much the same as Presley, were larger than he was himself. His wired scrawls had prompted and caught the high-wire life of the Golden Age. He was the artist and iconographer extraordinaire of holy shrines: the Tool Box (1964), the Stud (1968), the Red Star Saloon (1972), the No Name (1973), and the Ambush (1974).

### **Lust in the dust**

There's a miniseries in Chuck Arnett just as there is in the rise and decline of the Golden Age of Sexual Liberation. The man who had thrilled Broadway audiences retired to relative personal obscurity, haunting nightspots, seeking new visions for his pen and brush, searching for the tough men who populated his art.

He was a teacher of homomascularity. His vision was of the ideal raw-sex moment, of sweaty penetration, of attitude, of submission and domination fixed forever in the single frame of his minimalist drawings. That vision, what he drew, was the single, golden, orgasmic moment. His work aches with the hard-core romance of the ironically existential searcher who wishes to transcend time so that the orgasmic moment, celebrated between men, can last forever.

In the late '70s, the Tool Box, long deserted, was torn down by the city for urban renewal. Somehow, though, the wrecker's ball failed to knock down the stone wall with Arnett's mural of urban aboriginal men in leather made famous by *Life*.

For two years, at the corner of Fourth and Harrison, drivers coming down the off ramp from the freeway were greeted by Arnett's somber dark shadows, those Lascaux cave drawings of Neanderthal, primal, kick-ass leathersmen.

*Vita brevis. Ars longa.* (Life is short. Art is forever.) On March 2, 1988, at 12:45 p.m., Chuck Arnett, artist, peacefully transcended sixty years of his visionary life.

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