

PRISON BLUES:

Confessions of a Prison-Tour Junkie

Written October, 1977, this Feature Essay was published in *Drummer* 21, March, 1978; also published in John Embry's *Super MR*, #6 and #7, January 2001, and March 2001.

- I. Author's Eyewitness Historical-Context Introduction written June 6, 2001
- II. The feature essay as published in *Drummer* 21, March, 1978
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**I. Author's Eyewitness Historical-Context Introduction written June 6, 2001**

With a pernod and a porn-nod to Genet, the in-depth cover feature article, "Prison Blues," was an autobiographical essay designed with words and photos to wallow about a bit in the traditional gay fetish for cops, cons, rough trade, and the fantasy of the prison experience.

People often ask me what is my favorite issue of *Drummer*.

*Drummer* 21 is one of my favorite all-time issues because nobody fucked with me.

*Drummer* 21 is, actually, a perfect issue of *Drummer*.

*Drummer* 21 is in writing, photography, art, graphic design, erotic feel, and physical bulk the Platonic Ideal of my concept of absolute *Drummer*.

*Drummer* 21 is the issue, in fact, that put a little local rag on the international sex map.

*Drummer* 21 is the model every succeeding issue tried to be.

*Drummer* 21 was created without interference. I had the theme. I had the photos. I wanted a nice big, thick, juicy, arty issue that looked real, esthetic, and competitive on the news stands. I let nothing get in the way. Publisher John Embry, for whom I then had the greatest respect, had become gravely ill and during his six months' absence I tried to create ideal issues that would please him during his recuperation.

I even went to prison to get this piece.

Inside San Quentin.

*Drummer* 21, on the cover, is billed as the "What Happens in Prisons Is a Crime" issue.

I actually love this "Prison Blues" article. It has sociological resonance which lifts it up from being *eros* for the sake of *porn*, in the way that critic Justin Spring quotes artist Paul Cadmus separating his own (Cadmus') male nudes from the "sex-obsessive" male nudes of Tom of Finland in a letter to F. Valentine Hooven, Tom's biographer, in *Paul Cadmus, The Male Nude*. I am not as much an "erotic separatist" as Cadmus denigrating Tom whom I appreciate. I think Cadmus a bit of a prude and Tom a bit of a sentimentalist.

I also think the prudery of the *verboden* combined with the sentimentality of the *impossible Platonic ideal* makes porn hot.

But then I was raised as a modest, pure, and puritanical Catholic boy, worshipping on my

knees, staring up at a fifty-foot-tall sculpture of a crucified, athletic, muscular, handsome, nearly naked Jesus who was completely unattainable—except in the “transfigured” version of the blond high-school football captain, and his father, the local police chief, who knelt at the Communion railing with open mouths, tongues stuck out, eyes closed, while I, the altar boy, held a gold paten under their strong chins and studied their faces in close up at age twelve.

I also had a thing for the Good Thief, St Dismas, who was crucified alongside Jesus. This explains my erotic, and, mmm, sociological interest in the convicts of San Quentin in “Prison Blues.”

Oops. I was carried away with desire, or at least the pre-HIV memory of desire for muscular heroes and outlaws made legendary by writers like Sam Steward and photographers like Old Reliable who gave me ex-cons as birthday presents.

It is worth noting that the Catholic sub-text of gorgeous S&M, ritual, and handsome saviors and cruel devils is undeniably present in *Drummer*'s ethos and esthetic of fiction, features, drawings, and photographs. In this lies a certain irony because the LGBT press is so blatantly anti-Catholic politically, but so Catholic erotically. John Embry allowed me to publish a story I dug out of author John Trojanski titled, “In the Habit,” which was about Catholic seminary students for the priesthood, but Embry balked and said, “No,” when I pushed to publish my 1969 erotic poem, “Jesus Depressed,” which had the same blasphemous tone as Kenneth Anger's Catholic and leather S&M film, *Scorpio Rising*.

On the roadmap to erotica, the intellect is also a skyway to the enjoyment of sex—on different days a man can jerk off to both Cadmus and Tom of Finland, which should please Tom and dismay Cadmus. The brain is the main sex organ. So I always tried to make my bits in *Drummer* appeal to the reader's intellectual erotic interest as well as his jerkable erotic interest. Robert Frost famously wrote “Mending Wall” which teaches that we humans work from our hands to our heads. Hands-on experience teaches our intellect. Ergo, jerking off to engaging material can teach us a thing or two. Our brains and our dicks are palm driven. That's all an erotic artist need remember. Stroke both. That's why “Palm Drive” is not a street address, but rather an erotic pun for an erotic video company.

The late 20<sup>th</sup>-century self-inflated East Coast gay literary establishment, like Cadmus, always denigrated the West Coast gay literary establishment, because the Manhattanite-Sodomites generally understood the literary culture of books, but did not understand the literary culture of magazines, which by their nature are monthly reshaping themselves to reflect the readers—unlike books which reflect the authors.

Cadmus would have looked askance at *Drummer*, but he would have kept it under his bed for erotic emergencies. So which genre actually engages the reader most interactively: queer stories about coming out and HIV, or erotica? Actually, as editor of *Drummer* I would have published both Cadmus and Tom of Finland—next to each other.

I won't tell how many, or who, were the latter-day big East Coast literary names whose manuscripts I rejected from *Drummer* because they weren't hot enough, or skilled enough at that time, to excite the reader one way or the other, or, better, both ways. That crowd was never big in

magazines—a genre they could not conquer. Never forget that some of those now deeply established writers to this day remain pissed that their careers, which finally took off in the 80s, could not have gotten started earlier, in the 70s, in *Drummer*, because I sent them polite rejection slips. I could reveal their submission letters here both to *Drummer* and to my “Writer’s Aid,” my service which I advertised in *Drummer* to offer tutoring to wannabe erotic authors. (See *Drummer* 26, page 86.) But I won’t. I’ll be a gent.

Besides, it’s way more amusing fun to trace their fingerprints showing how those boy-o’s clawed their way up as they self-published each other, reviewed each other, blurbed each other, and gave each other awards, because—it must be said in their defense—mainstream book publishers would rarely touch gay book writing and legit small gay book presses did not arrive until the late 1980s, fifteen years after the post-Stonewall gay magazine culture arose.

That said, I believe, as does Anne Rice balancing her dual career as A N Roquelaure, in something some hoity “literary” writers don’t: erotic literature.

I believe in “smart sex.”

This is important to know how *Drummer* rose up, distinguished itself, and became a masculine-identified smart-culture of its own.

Women joke that men think with their hard dicks, but I know that men with hard dicks think.

The marketplace confirmed that. When I was editor, the press run rose from less than 5,000 copies to 42,000 copies of each *Drummer*. (Publisher John Embry was the source of that statistic when I asked him directly in 1979 during a salary discussion.)

I dragged “smart-sex content” as well as “smart-sex form” into what had been the formidable “Los Angeles *Drummer*” when I turned it into “San Francisco *Drummer*.” I worked and fought with the publisher to keep improving the content, form, and direction emerging in the first decade of liberation for the gay erotic press. It was only in the Stonewall summer of 1969 that U. S. postal laws changed to allow frontal nudity to be mailed. (Always connecting the dots, I even named the 1970s narrator of *Some Dance to Remember*, Magnus, in honor of pioneer Magnus Hirschfeld and his monumental gay and lesbian library so hated by the Nazis.) Today it sounds elitist to the current anti-intellectual politically correct, but—and this is so Norma Desmond—in the 1970s, grown-up readers were educated. They wrote actual letters thanking me for upgrading punctuation, spelling, grammar, and proofreading so that errors did not short-circuit their masturbation. That up-grade, I thought, was a due part of gay liberation. Treat gay magazines as if they were competing on a straight news stand.

Actually, Robert Mapplethorpe sought me out at *Drummer* precisely because of this issue’s, he said, “intelligent sex.” (I then commissioned a cover from him for *Drummer* 25.)

So “Prison Blues,” about a male action-adventure I really experienced, is not some fantasy. It buzzes with the gay gonzo *verite* I pursued of real male life outside the gay ghettos. And it’s alive with its back-story of “O’Riley” (Old Reliable) whom I was working to publicize as the extraordinary photographer I was introducing with this issue into *Drummer*. The mix of who and what the article is about and the way our Fritscher-Sparrow photographs were shot

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shows how much of a salon *Drummer* was once was when all of us were friends and some of us were lovers during the time I was editor.

In fact, the original *Drummer* publisher John Embry, who was never my lover and hardly my friend, so liked this particular piece that twenty-three years later when he wanted to reconstitute the glory days of early *Drummer* in his *Manifest Reader* magazine, he turned to me.

That, of course, made my day for two reasons.

It somewhat repaired our falling out of October to Christmas 1979 when he refused for the last time to pay David Sparrow and me. And better, it revealed what John Embry thought of my work in building the gorgeous thing that was 1970s *Drummer*.

When he asked permission to republish “Prison Blues” in two parts as “Jailhouse Tour Junkie” in his new magazine, *Super MR*, #6 and #7, January 2001, and March 2001, who could refuse?

*MR* is also notable for its Embry-written “Letters to the Editor” which repeatedly sing the praises of the recently deceased *Drummer* magazine that years before Embry had sold at issue 99, but never let go of.

The new buyers of *Drummer*, Anthony F. DeBlase and Andrew Charles, wisely created a legal clause that prevented John Embry from direct competition, meaning he could not sell *Drummer* and then create a competing mag very similar to *Drummer*. The back-story here is interesting. Publisher Tony DeBlase in *Drummer* 117, spring 1988, wrote an editorial exposing that John Embry’s *Manifest Reader* persisted in cloning and republishing materials previously published in *Drummer*. I wrote a letter on June 14, 1988, to Tony and Andy asking them to sign a note that all my work in *Drummer* was for “one-time publication use only” in case they, as had Embry, ever sold *Drummer* to some new publisher.

On September 4, 1988, Andy Charles wrote to me on Desmodus, Inc letterhead,

“Dear Jack, Enclosed you will find the statement you requested about manuscript and photo rights. Sorry for the delay.

We both thank you for the nice comments about *Drummer*.

The political climate continues to hurt us economically, as I’m sure it does you. Your comment about the need for the rights statement in case of sale of the mag amuses me. At this point, the sale of the mag business is a ‘consummation devoutly to be wished,’ but no one would be fool enough, as we were, to buy it!

Be well, Andy”

All this acrimony as well as the use and reuse of writing and illustrations touches something essential about the culture of *Drummer*. Everyone who was ever involved with *Drummer* in almost any way found the experience became embedded in their own personal history. For years, because of where I was in the line of descent in *Drummer* I had to listen to disgruntled *Drummer* talent and employees, as well as subscribers who thought I was still the editor after twenty years, and “where is my fucking new issue?”

However, *Drummer* always was bigger than any one person, because like the then contemporary musicals *Hair* and *A Chorus Line*, it was built on the base of group experience.

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*Drummer* was a magical mystery tour bringing up to the surface of gay popular culture the underground leather and S&M culture.

The secret of original recipe *Drummer* is that it centered on masculine-identified men who historically have always been the most invisible of queers. In fact, as Tony DeBlase noted in the twentieth-anniversary issue of *Drummer*, I actually nurtured the magazine by driving its masculinity quotient even more than its leather.

That's why as an analytical writer I was driven by conceptual necessity to coin the term "homomasculine."

In *Super MR #7*, John Embry wrote on page 6, "*Drummer!* The magazine that spawned an entire age."

I couldn't agree more. Despite Embry's taste-disability caused by over-exposure to the toxic camp of both the "1950s" (as time) and "Los Angeles" (as place), *Drummer* survived his infamous drag-queen cover on the Halloween issue, *Drummer* 9, October 1976. That "Cycle Sluts" cover was shot by Robert Opel who was always ironic, iconoclastic, and bent on satire.

None of those work in an erotic magazine that exists to make you cum.

But in LA, I don't think *Drummer* had realized its true identity or the true north of its audience.

When *Drummer* and Embry and Opel—all of them ridden out of town on a rail by the LAPD—moved to San Francisco, Al Shapiro (A. Jay) brought them to my doorstep. I figured if *Drummer* were to reflect an age, then I recommended it be a prism of the newly liberated life we were leading as masculine-identified American men who happened to be gay.

I composed San Francisco *Drummer* as a kind of international group journal of the 1970s, and encouraged others like Fred Halsted, Rex, Old Reliable, Wakefield Poole, and a non-ironic Robert Opel to add their voices with columns, drawings, and photographs.

Consequently, on its masthead, issue 25, I baptized *Drummer* as "The American Journal of Gay Popular Culture."

To create *Drummer* 21, I climbed into my Toyota Land Cruiser and drove my lover, David Sparrow, and two friends whom I had dragooned as models, across the Golden Gate Bridge, north to the Marin Headlands bunkers—where, later, I also took Robert Mapplethorpe for his piss-and-jockstrap shoot when he asked me where these *Drummer* 21 photographs had been shot in 1975.

*Drummer* 21 was a "lucky" issue.

Mapplethorpe saw it.

*Drummer* 21 brought Robert Mapplethorpe into my professional and personal life, and bounced my sweet David Sparrow in and out of my bed.

Nevertheless, David Sparrow and I shot a series of non-nude photographs that evoked "prison" sex, as well as some great face shots, because my marketing eye tells me that nothing works better on a magazine cover than a human face.

*Drummer* covers succeed best with "face."

Historically, the interior photograph, "Bear on a Toilet," page 70, which I shot near by the

Marin Headlands on Mount Tamalpais, shows my New York pal, K. Strater, seated on a toilet in a cement block building that doubled for a “prison” toilet. Shot in May, 1975, this photograph was published again by Aubrey Walter in the coffee-table photo book, *American Men*, GMP, London, 1995.

The photograph of a drop-dead handsome “Royal Canadian Mounted Policeman in Sweater and Riding Boots,” page 27, I shot at the Stanford-Cal game in 1976 in the company of Tony Perles. He was one of the first gay men to gentrify the Castro in 1967 and as early as 1970-71 was renting one of his flats to the leather S&M priest, Jim Kane, and his lover, former New York Jets football player, Ike Barnes. David Sparrow and I roomed with Kane and Barnes at that address during the two long hot summers of 1970 and 1971.

Anthony Perles was a founding member of the Pacific Drill Patrol. In 1980 I hired Tony for my technical writing staff at Kaiser Engineers and for years we commuted daily to work together. One of those gay men who worships railroads—others worship pipe organs in churches and movie theaters, Perles was a true historian of San Francisco and the author of several books on the San Francisco Muni, including *Tours of Discovery* and *Inside MUNI: The Properties and Operations of the Municipal Railway of San Francisco*, 1982. Anthony Herschel Perles died September 22, 1986. He deserves memorialization for both his pioneering roll-out of gay culture as well as for the photo opportunities he introduced me to which gave me frames to illustrate *Drummer*. He is representative of the many men who never appeared in *Drummer*, but who were the support troops and cheerleaders who kept the *Drummer* staff going.

It was at Tony Perles’ 19<sup>th</sup> Street home in 1971 that I shot one of my earliest erotic Super-8 movies, “Ball Weights of the Blond Bodybuilder,” out of which grew Palm Drive Video.

While living at Perles’, David Sparrow and I were photographed by Walt Jebe. Long before there was a Harvey Milk, Walt Jebe ran the Castro’s first camera and sex-film developing shop, “Jebe’s Camera,” on 19<sup>th</sup> Street a few doors west of Castro.

Those Fritscher-Sparrow photographs appeared in the 1972 magazine, *Whipcrack*.

David Sparrow for the summer of 1972 worked both the counter and the dark-room of Jebe’s Camera.

If all this detail ain’t the pop-culture context that builds up to *Drummer*, which itself was the pop-culture of Gay Lib in the 70s in San Francisco, what is?

In *Drummer* 21, the Fritscher-Sparrow cover model and interior model, pages 8-11, was our pal John Trowbridge, a muscular and hairy member of our Pacific Drill Patrol uniform club who was well reviewed in San Francisco as a supper-club pianist. (For my lyrics for a song to be featured in *Drummer* titled “Masochist Stomp,” John Trowbridge wrote the music.) John Trowbridge died August 17, 1988. The model with Trowbridge was my friend Chris Meyrovich, the star bartender at Allan Lowery’s Leatherneck, whom I shot as the solo star of my Palm Drive Video feature, *Sweat MacCloud*. (Christopher John Meyrovich: March 2, 1950 - December 12, 1992)

To make *Drummer* 21 pitch-perfect in content and homage of gay roots, I asked the Father of Modern Gay Writing, Sam Steward/Phil Andros, whom I had met in 1972, if I could

update and publish his 1950's short story, "In a Pig's Ass" which I billed as "A one-handed friction/fiction bonus." That is the first time those words "one-handed" appeared together in print as a concept slogan. Sam Steward was always so concerned about his copyright that I promised him his fiction would be marked according to the new copyright laws enacted January 1, 1978.

Because of this dramatic change in law that occurred while I was creating *Drummer 21*, I put a copyright at the end of each writer's work, including my own, but John Embry ordered most of them removed because he didn't see the need for the copyright notice when there was a by-line. The copyright law was a substantial change, but Embry was a born copyright scofflaw. I don't think he really took the legal end of *Drummer* as seriously as he took the financial. He himself, under the pseudonym of "Robert Payne," often delivered up pieces from 1940s and 1950s men's magazines such as *Saga* and *Argosy*. In 2002, nearly 80 years of age, the unstoppable Embry continues to send out to magazines, such as *Bound and Gagged*, articles written by his alter-ego "Robert Payne."

John Embry and I may have had creative differences over twenty-five years, but our relationship has been consistent. I have never been to his house and he has never been to mine. We have never had lunch, supper, or a drink together. Yet I give the guy credit where credit is due: he kept his pace in the long run. My only problem was the trouble his feuding with the *Advocate* and others caused writers and artists caught between warring parties in the gay publishing world, as well as his "black list" which eventually included nearly everyone who worked for him, and which hurt some of their careers mortally.

Unharmful by it was Robert Mapplethorpe who made the "black list" because he, like most of those who made the list, refused to buckle under to John Embry's control. (The 1970s issues were always copyright control and money.) In fury that Mapplethorpe would not let *Drummer* drop in more of his pictures to illustrate whatever, John Embry screamed at me, "The worst selling issue we ever had was that Mapplethorpe cover." Nevertheless, John Embry so liked Robert's content that he tried to stage and shoot imitations of Mapplethorpe photographs, particularly the close-up of the bloody cock and balls tied with rawhide to a board. His enmity toward my longtime friend eventually turned on me, particularly when in addition I refused to edit, write, or photograph for *Drummer* unless my salary was actually paid.

Anecdotally, during this same springtime, for the upcoming *Son of Drummer*, September 1978, John Embry gave me a funky old feature article (torn from some old yellow pulp mag) to re-write that was so bad, when he demanded I publish it ("Arab Death: The Legend of the Thousand Testicles"), I put as the by-line the name of "Denny Sargent," which is the name of my protagonist in my 1972 leather novel, *Leather Blues*, which was excerpted in *Son of Drummer* under its original 1968 title as *I Am Curious (Leather)*.

Actually, what makes *Drummer 21* perfect was being able to debut my friend, the artist David Hurles, who is Old Reliable Studios. His introductory first mention is in this "Prison Blues" feature, and then in the following monolog interview, "Scott Smith: Heavy Rap with a Solitary Ex-Con."

Old Reliable's specialty of cons, ex-cons, and street hustlers began with audiotapes, color

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and silent 8mm and Super-8mm movies, and still photographs—finally combining all these media into video in 1981. Reluctant to edit his first video, David Hurles was locked by Mark Henry and me into our bedroom and not allowed to come out until he was done. My interviews with Old Reliable have appeared in many magazines over the years since 1980. Had Hurles and I both not been blackballed by Embry, the interviews would have been in *Drummer*.

Fearing homomascularity, no gay magazine editor in the 70s would touch Old Reliable's dangerous photographs, but I assured him he'd be ideal in *Drummer*. By nature, Old Reliable is reticent and reclusive and ironic, so I packaged the deal by taking his audiotape of Scott Smith to Steve McEachern (owner of the Catacombs) who ran a transcription service, and in this way I produced the words and pictures to dramatize (through re-conceptualizing and writing) on the pages of *Drummer* the forbidden world of Old Reliable. David did not believe what happened.

Out came *Drummer* 21, and Old Reliable was a hit!

With the Smith transcript and 14 black-and-white Old Reliable photographs of bad boys arranged purposely helter-skelter like photos tossed on a table for masturbation purposes, his debut took rough trade out from the underground of Chuck Renslow's remarkable Kris Studios and Bob Mizer's astounding AMG into the gaystream, the leatherstream, the mainstream of *Drummer*.

Bob Mizer, publisher of *Physique Pictorial*, who died May 12, 1992, was a mentor and longtime friend to David Hurles who eloquently memorialized Mizer with filial affection in *Outcome* magazine, 1992. In late 1979, David had made sure that I interviewed Bob Mizer at his AMG Studio in 1980 for a piece I wrote that was published, not in *Drummer* for which it was written, but in *Skin* #5, May 1981.

*Drummer* 21 also marked the three-year anniversary of our Fritscher-Hurles' friendship and continuing collaboration which extended from buying a house together to the art of transcripts, photographs, and videos while remaining completely distinct identities, because we were never lovers, even though we tried sex once, for five minutes, and broke into total laughter.

On the other hand, David Sparrow and I were mad, passionate lovers, even after our divorce. I so drove David Sparrow into collaboration that for years we were the same person until we weren't. David Sparrow had not wanted us to move to San Francisco, because he said repeatedly, "San Francisco is where you go to lose a lover." In my memoir-novel *Some Dance to Remember*, the character of the pornographer Solly Blue is fictively based on some aspects of David Hurles, and the character of Teddy is likewise fictitiously spun out of some aspects of David Sparrow.

Years before David Hurles turned himself into Old Reliable in 1972, back when he was about nineteen, he worked in the late 1960s for the Guild Press, Washington, D.C., as both model and photographer. When Guild Press was arrested and put on trial, David Hurles was able to testify as one person who was both photographer and model. (Hurles famously was able to suck himself.) Offering himself as Exhibit A, the politically savvy and very intellectual pioneer Hurles convinced the jury that the simple act of photographing a model did not harm the model as a person, which was the prosecution's main point.

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Ironically, David Hurles's subsequent life as Old Reliable proves that the photographer is more at risk from his dangerous ex-con models, particularly when they are twenty-to-thirty-something and from America's best trailer parks and juvenile facilities in the rebel South.

The gay interest in police and prisons roared up in 70s San Francisco when the Police and Sheriff's departments actively recruited gay men and lesbians.

For me, wearing a uniform with the Pacific Drill Patrol was not enough. With Bill Essex as training partner, I built up as much muscle and strength as possible for the physical tests, which were hot, because actual deputies ran the drills and sat on your feet while you crunched out sit-ups, all the while urging you on.

Mmm.

Out of the thousand or so candidates, I came in at number 11 on the Civil Service List, and, after wrestling with the temptation to be an "actual man's man," as opposed to being an "erotic man's man," three times turned down the opportunity to become a San Francisco Deputy Sheriff, because, while the romance of it was erotic, the reality of it was physically dangerous and downwardly mobile, especially because I my had my long-standing career at Kaiser Engineers as well as being *Drummer* editor which was itself a full-time job.

Few artists should ever give up their day jobs. The only thing more pathetic than an artist trying to live off his art is a pornographer thinking he will make a living. A hungry man will sell out both art and porn to buy a hot-water heater.

My pals who became deputies mostly all came to dead ends, literally, because of the stress as well as the taking of steroids to build up chests and arms and shoulders and calves necessary for the glamour as well as the power of what it takes to be a deputy who deals with life and death situations. Besides, I really don't think I could cope with life and death any more real than *Life and Death in Tennessee Williams*, my doctoral dissertation.

After this "Prison Blues" feature, editor Mark Henry has included a 1984 review of an extraordinary photo book shot in Texas penitentiaries that is part of the "Virtual *Drummer*" I continued to write for the *Drummer* audience in the 1980s in magazines like *Man2Man Quarterly* #7, July-September 1981, and *Inches*, Volume 1, Number 1, 1985, both of which published this review.

The book is *Conversations with the Dead*, 1971, by Danny Lyon whose work I tried repeatedly to cover in *Drummer* in the 1970s. A photo from *Conversations* was published with permission from the publisher to illustrate Lyon's work on the cover of *Man2Man Quarterly* #7, 1981, and it was the photo I would have put on the cover of *Drummer*: a hot prison guard on horseback with a rifle.

*Conversations with the Dead* was the photo book most bought and sold and traded in the 1970s leather community in San Francisco.

I met Danny Lyon when he came to lecture on his work at Western Michigan University in 1972 where I was an associate professor. I immediately became this straight photographer's gay champion—whether he wanted one or not—because he was also the photographer who shot the Chicago Outlaw Motorcycle Club in his coffee-table book, *The Bikeriders*.

## II. The feature essay as published in *Drummer* 21, March, 1978

Bound for Glory:  
San Quentin's Saturday Night Fever...

PRISON BLUES:  
Confessions of a Prison-Tour Junkie

In the main gym at San Quentin the cement is wax-smooth. The work of thousands of bare male feet. In the showers at Auschwitz, the cement is scored with the long finger-nail scratches of humans clawing their way futilely out of small places. Here, at the Big Bastille on the Bay, the pad of sweaty feet, heel and ball pivoting, running, jumping to score a basket, falling, kicked-and-rolled by a dozen jockers turning out some little punk in the course of good clean fun while the guard shines it on (turns his face away), has smoothed the roughness.

### GYMS SMELL LIKE MEN

The San Quentin gym smells like con-jock sweat. Dirty football uniforms and pads hang just out of my reach under row upon row of *Hustler* and *Playboy* color centerfolds boldly unfolded: stapled beavers, one of which some pissed-off anonymous smoker burned right through the twat with the hot end of a Lucky Strike. At the far end of the huge gym stand the heavy barbells and weight benches on wooden platforms raised two inches above the smooth cement. To the right, three red steps lead up to an empty boxing ring canvassed in a shiny dark blue right out of *Rocky*. The ceiling girders are eighty feet high above us. An ache runs through me. A longing.

A dozen cons tend to us. This is their space. This is a place of caged men. For real. The gym bleachers are initialed and soaked with porous sweat. The panic of being an outsider overtakes me. Covertly I pop 10 mg of cool blue Valium to quiet the rising panic and to still the longing ache, to sit obedient in this gym lock-up, listening to the glib patter, sniffing out more than the uniforms, sniffing out the violence and murders that give these men life.

At San Quentin, claustrophobic terror hardens my dick. Prison tours are my hobby. Editing *Drummer* ain't enough to keep a bird alive, so lucky for me, my real career, my day job, is writing for a huge corporation that buries nuclear waste, and likes to give us employees tours of the Bay Area.

I go to jail every chance I get. To visit. Fanatic subcultures fascinate me. I get off on the cons harboring secret con tempt for the giggling public come for the Saturday night "fun" of the "jailhouse dinner tour," getting their goddamn double-knits leisure suits frisked at the Big Q entrance so they can walk cell to cell with a stick poking at the inmates. Always my mind-camera is running, recording the extremes that life offers.

"These men," the officer of the day told us, "have volunteered to be your guides. No

instructions have been given as to what they can or cannot say. You cannot tip them or give them anything. You give them anything and they'll be in trouble and if they get in trouble, then you'll get in trouble. We just ask you not to light up when you're in the woodworking shop. Otherwise, enjoy your walk. Ask the men whatever you like. They're pretty thick-skinned and not too sensitive. If they don't want to answer, they don't have to. Okay. As I say, enjoy your walk."

Our guide, for our group of ten voyeurs, wears scrubbed and pressed blue Levi's.

Visitors are forbidden to wear Levi's. "No jeans or illicit drugs," the guide sheet warned when the tour was arranged. Also: "Hostages will not be recognized." Terrific! When you walk into another world, you walk into its terms.

I listened to our con-guide. You the fuck think he ever tells the truth? It's his Levi's, man. Laundry is cause for war in the Joint. According to law, every dude wears the same "shit" stenciled with his own number: shoes, shirts, and shorts. But Inside is like Outside on the Street. Distinctions this double-knit tour will never see make all the difference Inside. Dudes in starched, pressed shirts and razor-sharp creased Levi's or black Chelsea boots, or, hoo-boy, a stud in gold-rimmed shades, are all mothers working some scam: dealer, connection, locksmith, forger, hit man, armbreaker, enforcer, snitch, whatever. What's sure is that our guide-dude's a specialist with something going

He's upper-crust prison-shit.

Our guide's scam: he's some kind of in-House arbitrator. He's the King Rat in the movies who plays both ends against the middle and ends up with a Plexiglas shiv stuck in his ribs. What gave him away was his black turtleneck shirt: subtle, but revealing of his thick arms and thicker chest. He talked endlessly about the importance of personal hygiene. I imagined him sweaty and stripped down for his one weekly shower. He was from the Deep South where they leave meat blind and uncut. Cheese. He has, I bet, a cheese problem. Under his foreskin. That's why he traded cigarets for extra showers. Sometimes, he admitted, he sneaked an extra wash-off with a fire hose to clean-up during the week.

He was 27 and hot and his hair was blow-dried with a handheld dryer. He spied about the warden who made the men choose whether they wanted to shower or attend college-credit classes. One or the other. Not both. Men have to learn, the warden said, how to make decisions. No wonder the newspapers carry stories that start: "The warden of San Quentin Prison was belted in the jaw by a convict yesterday while trying to cool things down after a stabbing melee. Warden George Sumner—a rugged, 6-foot-2-inch former football player who weighs more than 200 pounds—instantly took what a prison spokesman called 'reflex defensive action,' and belted the con right back. Despite a sore jaw, Sumner shrugged off the incident. 'It's just part of my job,' he said, 'and I've been hit before.'"

#### STRIP SEARCH: OUR GUIDE, BILL

Our guide had been hit before too. He was a man who had been strip-searched, man-handled from his shackled bare feet, up the outside of his big thighs, rubber-fingered up the butt, foreskin

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rolled back for short-arm inspection, hands frisking up to his hips, his waist, his muscled ‘pits, his heavy chest and shoulders, his big bull neck—all of him shook down all the way in the “Lock,” a high echoing snot-green chamber stationed between the outer walls and the inner walls, filled with smoke, milling cons, and shouting guards. “Line up, come on, goddamnit.”

Thirty minutes before, we had stood like good-citizen cattle in the “Lock” between two gigantic steel-bar doors. One door goes inside the wall; the other door, out. In the rafters, covered with the unreachable grease of grey cottage cheese dust, spar-rows twittered, flying in and out when-ever one door or the other opened. The doors were fixed so only one opened at a time.

What was it like for him to be “Processed in?” Stripping off his clothes, standing naked in a sweaty line of multi-racial cons, surrendering his effects while three beefy guards armed with shotguns paced the gunwalk inches above his shaved head, getting sprayed with anti-louse disinfectant, standing first on one foot, then the other, listening to a bored bass voice shout out, thick with years of whiskey and cigar smoke: “Swearing, cursing, fighting, disrespect to officers, arguments, sodomy, masturbation, homosexuality, drugs, unnatural acts, and political agitation will not be tolerated.”

Jesus! He was beautiful no matter what scam had gotten him from new-fish con with scalped head to full-blown, blow-dried tour guide. Shit! Pinned to his black turtleneck sweater was an ID card: BILL. Bill directed us to look one way. I looked the other. He remarked about a building dated 1842 on the right. I looked left, up through the broken glass and bars of a mean six-tier block.

On the third tier up, a young blond biker, long hair combed wet and straight back, stood stripped to the waist, heavy tattoos on heavier arms, muscled, white cotton pants, beltless and barefoot, staring down at the action on the main floor below him, action I could not see, but he could, looking down between his tattooed forearms resting easy on the iron railing.

No one else noticed him. No one else on the tour, that is, except my buddy, O’Riley, who everybody I know calls “Old Reliable.” He never misses a trick. Especially a con trick. Old Reliable always sees everything. He always has. That’s how he got reliable. That’s how he got old at 33. We exchanged knowing looks and turned back to Bill, away from the third tier.

“I’d pay him a hundred bucks to sit on my face,” Old Reliable whispered.

“And blow ‘Dixie’ out his ass,” I said.

Bill was pulling our tour-group along. “This is the spot,” he said, “where the yellow fire hydrant is now, of the old whipping post. The heaviest sentence to come down was a man getting 190 lashes administered over a two-day period. The original infirmary is right nearby. I ‘m glad the state has done away with corporal punishment.”

My knees grew weak. Old Reliable dragged me from the hydrant. The energy remained of that whipped man’s agony. The broiling sun. The silence in the brick-walled plaza. Silence except for the sound of the whip whistling through the sun and cutting across his back. Silence except for his bit-lip hiss breaking finally beyond scream into full-racked roar slumping to half-conscious moan. Silence except for the panting of the guard in full uniform, heaving with sweat, laying the leather strap again and again, according to the warden’s strictly counted cadence,

across the naked man's back. Silence now with the moon rising cool over the Bay. Silence like an unsettling dream remembered too clearly on waking.

I space out on the prison energy.

#### *DREAM MOVIE SEQUENCE*

*Two horsemen break the flat horizon. Their heads rise in the distance against the blue. They rock easy in their ancient saddles. Their horses surge against the reins. The men are warriors, dark and bearded. Their helmets catch the sun. The men and horses are armed with fur and leather. They rise proudly against the full line of the horizon.*

*The camera catches behind them a trail of dust as they move in long-lens slow-motion. A rope stretches taut behind the second horseman. Gradually, the camera makes out the rope's burden: first the bound wrists, then the stretched arms dislocated from the bleeding shoulders of the man who is naked and dying but not dead.*

*Silent above the sad procession a great bird hangs motionless, following the horsemen trawling the side of human flesh. The bird catches an updraft and circles timeless above the horsemen. They ride evenly onward, across a ridge above a still lake. In the noon-sun shimmer they double in the placid lake reflection. The descending hooves of the upright horses meet precisely the rising hooves of the inverted water horses. Below them, and above them, the carrion bird circles noiselessly. In the mouth of the bound man, thin wires roll his tongue into a cylinder swelling purple from his mouth. His cock is wired the same: a purple bloody cylinder.*

*The horsemen, proud and straight drag the man off into the blinding noon brightness.*

I was having the vapors.

"Come on," Old Reliable grabbed my arm. "You're lagging behind."

"I'm not lagging."

"You're standing on your tongue." Old Reliable dragged me away from the whipping post.

Often I perceive the aura of a place long after the event has receded.

#### PRISON JERK-OFF: ARIZONA OUTLAWS

Once in 1970, at the historical prison at Yuma I pulled my 1969 Toyota Land Cruiser into the rocky parking lot late enough in the hot August afternoon to miss the crowded tours. David Sparrow, who was my lover a year then, threw some coins into the turnstile. We nodded to the bored Ranger in charge and wandered alone through the lengthening shadows of the roofless cellblocks. Bronze plaques described the Zane Gray macho conditions. At the far end of the compound, twenty minutes before the 5 PM closing, I pulled open a heavy iron door and headed down a dark ten-foot adobe corridor to another iron door latticed in a welded gesture of ventilation by some thick-armed smithy a century before.

"You better not go in there," David said. "Not that cage in that cell."

“Chickenshit,” I said. “If you’re scared to, go out and stand guard.”

He cut back quick to the fading Arizona sunset. I pushed through the second iron door into a twelve-by-twelve windowless adobe room in whose center had stood a nine-by-nine foot cage averaging a dozen desperadoes in the tight kiln space of group solitary confinement. Sartre said, “Hell is other people.” And in that breathless darkness, alone behind two iron doors, the accumulated rage and energy of all the men ever confined within that airless room in that cold cage, bumping and grinding one grizzled body against the other, made in that privacy my privates hard, and once hard, came the involuntary unbuttoning of my fly, the lick of my hand, and the stroked salute to all the men locked in once-and-future cages.

Old Reliable, as Sparrow had been, was embarrassed the others might notice. But hardly anybody notices anything. That’s why most of the time anyone can do anything, jerk off anywhere. As long as you don’t rattle the cage they’re protecting themselves in. As long as you don’t scare their horses.

Part of me wanted out of the Big Q fast. Another part wanted to stay forever.

Absolute ground control of my head is to realize fantasies, to know how far to take them, to clutch the brink of danger close, and then to thrust it safely away: approaching a pair of cops in a squad car to ask their opinion of the Consenting Adult Law; then asking them to “Please stop arresting me, I’ve cum!”

Our con led us on with his gallows rap. He walked flawlessly backwards in the way patented by tour guides from Mount Vernon to Disneyland. “On the left is the original cellblock. If a prisoner gave the guards a bad time, they chained him to the wall or strapped him into a leather restraining jacket. For hours, days, weeks.” He laughed. “I’m glad California has done away with heavy-duty punishment. In those old days, before teargas, when too much trouble came down, the guards spread lye on the block floor and turned a hose on it. The fumes handled the problem.”

## BELT A BROAD

One of my co-workers, a woman in an I. Magnin coat, suitable for a prison-chic evening in Marin, raised her hand like some for crissakes perennial Mills College undergrad cunt. “What are you in for,” she asked.

Our little group stopped dead in its tracks. (And Old Reliable had been fearful I’d embarrass everybody.)

Bill smiled. “I got sick of everyday doing 9-to-5, 9-to-5. So now I’m doing 20-to-life.”

“Try to outcon a con,” Old Reliable whispered.

Reliable ought to know: he’s fucked with enough ex-cons to have the climax–after-the-sex-climax–be a gun to his head while his flat was shook down for cash. He kept thinking, if that gun goes off, it will hurt. But he found enough money to satisfy the tattooed nineteen-year-old who, Reliable said, could have had the bread just for the asking he was so good in bed with his thick thighs. Other times, a guy emptied his closet of all his clothes, another took

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a camera which a third guy said he could ransom back for forty dollars. Reliable's no fool, but it was worth a try. Turned out to be another learning experience. Never saw the third one again either. The con-game was his trip. He set it up. He liked primary encounters. He could read people faster than Evelyn Wood could read the Gettysburg Address. "This guy's in for murder," he said.

Bill tooled our tour neatly around a corner. "Up in that loft, which next year will get torn down, was the gallows. A double gallows." He counted out his pause, using the time to continue the force field of eye contact with the I. Magnin coat. "Fall-partners. That's what they called guys hanged two at a time. They shackled their hands behind their backs, walked them up the stairs, tied their ankles together, put the nooses tight around their necks, pulled black hoods down over their faces, dropped the double-trap, and kissed their asses goodbye."

The double-knit group chuckled appreciatively: this good-natured con was exactly what they had hoped for.

"Executions strike me as, well, rather messy," the I. Magnin coat said.

"Messy?" Bill laid on her his best Mr. Goodbar stare.

"Definitely in for murder," Old Reliable whispered. "He's gonna hit her with both barrels."

"Death, ma'am," Bill said, "is always messy." He stepped toward her. "When a hanged man hits the end of his rope, he dumps, yeah, dumps in his drawers and pisses, excuse the human biology, down his leg."

He had her full attention.

He had mine.

He had everybody's.

She was cuming in her coat. "I've read," she said, "that hanged men die with erections." This cunt would not stop. She stepped toward him. He picked up on her lust and led the dance she had begun. The group was more enthralled than embarrassed by their up-front rutting. Tension hung heavy in the evening air.

Old Reliable rode to the rescue: "Dying with a hardon beats dying with your boots on."

Laughter broke the spell of the heated *pas de deux* of the con with the coat.

## THE WORLD WE LIVE IN

Reliable was good at that: adapting, making people adapt. His half-way house at his apartment for bad-boy ex-cons was his practice. He had long been cynical, but was far from jaded. *Jaded is when you do it, but don't enjoy it, whatever it is.* He was cynical. He was frank. You adapt or you get out. You adapt or you die. He adapted continually. He handled alternate realities well. All the time, I thought. Whatever it is, he enjoys it.

Except one night, late, a bit drunk and a lot ripped, he told me, confessed actually, embarrassed the way a woman is embarrassed after a rape. No fault of hers nor in this case his, but the embarrassment acute all the same.

Old Reliable is reliable, but not old. He is, in fact, at 33, boyishly attractive. That was part of what makes him an easy touch for so many ex-cons. Anyway, one of his San Quentin graduates warned him that to a con, a gay man is automatically considered an easy mark. That was no news to Old Reliable, who's been taken to the cleaners more often than a clean-queen's jockey shorts.

Three years before this drunken night, for instance, he was vacationing in Beirut, pushing the edge of danger that so thrills him. The Hilton was under fire. The city was an armed camp. In two months the American ambassador would be murdered. But this night, Reliable was traveling through the Moslem section in the early evening to ball a friend who was a gold merchant. The driver of his car cursed their luck as the car immediately ahead rear-ended the auto closest to the intersection. The trunk of the car in front of Reliable popped open. "Omigod," he said. Bulging from inside the sprung trunk of the small car was a fully clothed bullet-riddled body. Within seconds a mob careened around all three cars. Veiled women ululated a high-pitched wail. The driver of the middle car was dragged into the street shouting above the din. "It is only the body of a Christian."

Two dozen or more Moslem men inspected, milled about, pushed around all three cars, conferred more loudly, and then surrounded Old Reliable completely, stalled in the traffic in their section. They smashed the glass of the locked doors. His driver was silenced by a gun-butt to the mouth. The driver fell unconscious, bleeding across the steering wheel.

The men pulled Old Reliable from the car and dragged him past the body of the dead Christian, doused with gasoline and burning in a heap on the street. The crowd had no patience with a foreigner who might be a Christian, or worse, a Jew. They punched at him without question. They lifted him bodily and carried him into a shop whose corrugated storefront a dark moustached man pulled down from its roll in the ceiling and locked to a ring in the floor.

In the semi-darkness, Old Reliable could see very little. Hands held him, pushed and punched him. A thick-veined fist tore the sleeve off his jacket. A frenzy of ripping and shredding followed. Buttons popped as his shirt tore away. His zipper-fly split apart at the bottom as his slacks were dropped like shackles around his ankles. For a moment, the men held him, fair-skinned against their olive darkness, stripped to his white undershorts.

No one moved. The silence was absolute.

Then a short thick man punched him hard in the stomach and his shorts were ripped away. For two hours they beat him with their fists and, holding him firmly with many hands in the stifling room, took an electric cattle prod to his eyelids, gums, penis, testicles, and anus. He expected to be raped. He wasn't.

He thought they wanted information. They didn't and besides he knew none.

He thought there was some purpose to his torture, but they wanted no more than to vent some release through his pain.

At last, allowed to fall to the floor, he lay flat on his back. Three streams, he remembered three streams, exactly three, of piss rained down from the darkness on his face and genitals. Then they lifted him, pulled up his torn slacks, rolled up the corrugated steel door, and shoved him into

the street alone. The door rolled down closed behind him. He tried to pull what was left of his clothes together around him to avoid attention, to pretend nothing had happened so that no more would happen, but no one seemed to notice.

In the distance, the shelling of the hotels continued. Gunfire crackled through the night. They had hurt him anonymously, for no reason, for nothing he did. They had just hurt him for some kicks and he felt dirty enough to be sick in the street, next to the burnt-out body, dirty and sick and embarrassed enough to mention nothing of the incident until this one night of confidences. And even at that, he seemed to hold something back.

People who are tortured, for whatever reason, seem always to gain a reserve, a mistrust, a modesty, born of an astonished, well-grounded fear of their own kind.

Bill, our Quentin guide had that restraint. Only his modesty handled the predatory assault of the lady with her hands buried deep in the side pockets of her coat. More men go to prison because of women than any other reason. He had been decorated in 'Nam and looking at her San Francisco face, he knew a mine field when he saw one.

Some men in prison gain solitude in solitary. Some cut off their penises and hand them out in atonement in a tin cup to a guard passing by. Prisons are all different and all the same. The Quentin population isn't punk kids maturing their street images inside the big house.

These are full-grown men doing a dark time in a narrow place.

#### MAXIMUM "SECURITY"

Prison is the place where, when you go there, they have to take you in. Prison in America is the maximum security. Prison is where men who can't make it in the mean streets go to have their needs met. The prison "security syndrome" is Life-on-the-Installment-Plan: three years in the Joint; three months on parole; then back Inside to start all over again. Some gays, when arrested, instead of freaking out, find a strange sense of peace, security, and relief from the constant cruising tension of the gay lifestyle. Prison is the place where guards fire a couple shots to break up a fight where one inmate suffers a deep laceration above his right eye and another stab wounds in the face, back, and buttocks.

Prison is the reality where society permits hired, uniformed sadists to back-flush toilets on men locked down in solitary confinement, where pharmaceutical companies make deals to perform medical experiments on inmates who submit to almost anything for the extra bread, and time off their sentence. If you don't have money in prison, you bargain one way or another with your body. Prisons are where men are sentenced, no matter if they were Tops or Bottoms when they were on the streets to a life of obedient masochism.

The American prison system takes, more often than not, the truly aggressive macho male, who cannot be corralled by the usual middle-class obedience-training of husbands, and separates his overly aggressive XYY-chromosome flesh by means of cold bars from the rest of "polite" society, where normal men have only XY chromosomes.

Prison is the Ultimate Sadism: society's topping of a Top. Prison is a rite of passage. On

American streets, you're not a man until you've done some time. Ironic or existential? You choose.

## TATTOOS

Like the mark on Cain, prison marks its men. The forbidden art of prison tattooing gives blatant signal Inside and Outside that here is a man who has paid his ritual dues. Tattoos range from the most primitive straight-pin-and-India-ink markings to truly sophisticated, but contraband, three-needle professional artistry. They are always one color: blue. A *star on the face* tells that the con has done at least five years. A *cross on the hand* with radiating marks indicates the number of reform-school stretches. A *rose* means either you like cunt or are one. A *swastika* shows membership in a prison gang like the Aryan Brotherhood. A *web on the elbow* signifies time done in a particular prison; in Bill's case, Soledad.

## SAN QUENTIN: ONE OF THE BEST

Prisons are the last medieval institutions in American life; and they are important to the state's economy. The irony is that prison is a walled ghetto where administrators, guards, civilian employees, and cons are all locked together in an environment of fourth-rate failure. San Quentin features a law library and a furniture factory as well as a number of vocational rehab programs. Ironically, in most prisons lifers get the best jobs. Why train somebody who will eventually get out?

Conditions at "SQU" are nowhere as bad as conditions in the absolute secrecy of USMC-run briggs where little is reported about the adhesive-tape head bondage, the beatings, and the sexual abuse. The worst US prison, as recently as the 1960's, was in Alabama where cons were whipped with heavy leather paddles across bleeding buttocks for minor infractions, for refusing to be "turned out" as punks for a line-man trustee; where thorazine was forcefully injected into the veins of a con cornered by the guards who'd take bets on which way he'd fall.

Paul Newman's *Cool Hand Luke* was not filmed out of thin air, nor is the 1978 film *The Brutalization of Franz Blum*. In Alabama, prisoners have been strapped to tables in the sick bay and then the "Tucker Telephone," attached with electrodes to their cocks, tits, tongues, and toes, was cranked up to proper screaming voltage. Burt Reynolds may shoot prison comedies like *The Longest Yard*, but only recently has even California abolished spot-welding a con into his cell, for up to a year at a time, so he stays put, isolated, with no key to bypass the weld, no way in hell to get him out fast when he is sick suicidal, or burning in his cage. In this Age of Anita [Bryant, anti-gay Florida orange-juice spokeswoman, and Miss America] the death penalty is through-out America on its hanging, shooting, gassing, injecting, electrifying way back. Gary Gilmore, hooded and strapped into his death-wish wooden chair, daring the state of Utah to shoot him in bondage to death, proves we live perilously close to the primitive days of *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*. [Gary Gilmore was shot to death, January 17, 1977, by the state of Utah and was

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the first person to be executed after the reinstatement of the death penalty.]

## STIR CRAZY

San Quentin features a dozen indoor and outdoor gyms for pumping iron, and pumping out anger, on incline benches of sweatsoaked canvas. All around, the grey-pink walls are topped with 3-foot diameter coils of wire, barbed every four inches with two-inch razor slashes of steel. San Quentin grew like Topsy. Very turvy. The prison's origins are lost in myth.

"Way back in history," Bill said, "convicts were locked in a prison ship anchored in the Bay. One night a storm tore the ship loose from its mooring and washed it up on Point San Quentin. First, tents were put up, and then the compounds, compounded with other compounds, until this friggling place became the virtually uncontrollable maze it is today."

The Marin County moon rose full over Quentin as our group was conducted through the puzzle of corridors, catwalks, gates, and gardens marked OFF LIMITS because the bushes and trees planted as a bleeding-heart rehab idea so long ago had grown big enough to overshadow quick sex and quicker stabbings.

"Some guys used to like to go into that garden and sit by the fishpond and meditate," Bill said. "Not now. No more. No way." He pointed to the way the moon threw deep shadows across the maze of buildings constructed with no particular design over the years. "New retention facilities," he said, his words again proper as befit an honor guide "are laid out for easy inspection by guards. Quentin has too many nooks crannies, unused corridors, old stairwells, places no guard can cover long enough to keep a con safer than sorry."

A double-knit man raised his hand. Like he was in some fucking schoolroom. "I read," he said, "about the problem of homosexuality."

"Homosexuality " Bill cut him dead, "ain't no problem." And that ended that conversation.

"But are you in physical danger?" a woman asked.

"Not if you keep to yourself. Sometimes a guy will owe a dealer, and when he can't pay, the dealer has him offed. Sometimes when he can't pay, he offs the dealer. You keep clean, you get good time, you get privileges. Like ahead of us here in the Honor Block, you're gonna peek into Citizens' Row."

Two guards—one of them with, I swear, 18-inch-circumference forearms—clicked us off on their counters. Our hands had been stamped for ultraviolet identification. Just so us prison-tour-junkies couldn't change places with some con: him leaving for the cold streets Outside, us staying in the warm security Inside.

"San Quentin is," Bill said, "for 363 of its 2,197 inmates, a fairly comfortable home away from home."

Our group single-filed along the row of honor cells where each man, with 16 months' good time, can live alone in a 4x9 foot space 9 feet high. The walk was embarrassing, like some Toms peeping in where we shouldn't, but even embarrassed fast glances showed that when a

man has nothing but time in a very small space, his personality ingenuously expresses his total attitude, his meticulous focus on his toiletry kit.

One by one we cruised the empty cells like exhibits in Macy's windows each coffin-like space an idealized fantasy one with swastikas and covers from outrageous *Easy Riders* magazine; others set up for jewelry hobbies; some with black velvet nude tit paintings under black light; one, a definite monk's cell; another arranged like a writer's loft, the rack-bed hung two feet from the ceiling the plywood shelf under it centered with a typewriter and paper neatly arranged. Stereo headphones and small color TV's sat in every cell. The honor cells can be locked from the inside by the con himself to protect his belongings.

"I thought this was supposed to be a jail," a man said. "This is peace and quiet. "

"This is," Bill said, "even in the honor block, a place where you do what you're told to do."

"Everyday I have to do," the good citizen threw back "what my corporation tells me to do."

"No shit."

"I pay the taxes that let you live here. "

"For the rest of my natural unnatural life."

"But, really," the I. Magnin coat rolled back into the action, "what about homosexuality?"

"Frankly, lady, in prison, homosexuality has nothing to do with what you call on the Outside being gay. Our up-front gay cons stick pretty much together. Just like any group of consenting adults."

"But TV is always reporting homosexual rape," the tax-paying citizen said.

"Homosexuals don't attack other males," Bill said. "Straight dudes rape other dudes, straight or gay. A homosexual attack, as you call it, like the rape of a lady, has nothing to do with sex. It has to do with aggression. The cock is the weapon. It's just pure, simple, brutal, ass-bleeding aggression."

## CHOW DOWN: FORK IN THE HEAD

We ate with the cons.

While I waited in line behind Old Reliable, with my tin plate, fork, spoon, and no knife, an eye came to a peephole in a heavy metal door.

The eye changed to a tongue that wiped its wet way around the perimeter of the cold green hole.

Old Reliable checked the oral action too.

The tongue pulled back behind moustached lips that whispered, "Hey, Bro, you got a file on you?"

The various con-guides split strategically to tables where the foxiest touring ladies sat picking at the chicken and mashed potatoes. That was the last we really saw of Bill. He

disappeared into the subtle lust hetero-ing his way with the women over the dessert and coffee.

Above us, prisoners' murals depicted California history. The wooden ceiling, 80-feet high, was stuck with forks. The outlawed outlaw game had been to bend three tines back and place the fork on the mess-table edge. Then with all the bulked strength of a hard-fisted blow, hit the fork handle, shooting it ceilingward.

If it stuck, the con's rep was made.

If the fork fell short, turned in mid-flight, and started its murderous descent faster and faster, point down, into the mess hall crowd, somebody shouted HEADS UP and every con ducked fast under the protecting table tops. Some fun.

#### BUSTER AND BILLIE: BOY AND GIRL OUTLAWS

Currently, Old Reliable has come down like a fork from his ecstasy of the dinner-tour-show at the Big Bastille on the Bay. All because one of his corresponding cons has recently been paroled after ten years for armed robbery. Buster is a primary heterosexual, but he puts out either way. Reliable, remember, like all gay men, is considered an easy mark, and Buster on parole needs all the support good Old Reliable can give. "Besides the straight cons, a lot of gay men languish in prison. *Drummer* received an interesting and seemingly authentic letter reprinted here.

*Dear Publisher:*

*I would like for you to print an ad in your gay news paper for me, I am in Columbus State Prison, doing 4-25 years, and don't have any money or family to write to. My name is Bud E. Gooden Jr., I am 30 years old, and have been gay all my life. My number is No. 144- 292. I have brown hair and blue eyes. I am 175 lbs, 5 feet, 11 inches. Sir, it sure does hurt when the Officer passes my cell, with no mail for me. I like to dance, and go camping, hiking, fishing, horseback riding, and most of all have sex with a man and make real good love with them. When I don't get any mail, then I will read a book or write me a poem, so please print this ad for me if you will, Sir, and I want to Thank You so very much for taking the time to read this, and hope you will help me out, Sir. Sir, if you do help me, or even if you don't please let me know something if you will. I am sending my full name and number for you, Sir.*

*Sincerely yours,*

*Mr. Bud E. Gooden Jr. No. 144-292*

*P.O. Box 511 W. Spring St*

*Columbus, Ohio 43216*

Gay people in prison suffer a whole different trip. Two prisons for the price of one. It's one thing to get fucked, to give consent to be fucked. It's traumatic even if you ordinarily like it up the ass, to be raped in a cellblock gangfuck.

Meanwhile, Old Reliable's Buster has met his inevitable big-titted peroxide Billie. They're a very small-time Clyde and Bonnie working Reliable like a fish on the line. Billie even confessed the other afternoon that she only looks 20. She's a lot younger. One yap out of her and Buster violates parole with a statutory rape charge. She's got him where she wants him. But

maybe he needs to go back, leaving the mean bricks of Market Street for the max security of the Big House. Billie, with her sweet adolescent urge to confess, told Old Reliable between Cokes and chain-smoked Marlboros, while Buster was out at McDonald's, that Buster was thinking about burgling Reliable's apartment.

Reliable took Billie's revelation in stride .

"You write to somebody in prison for six years, send him money and new Frye boots and he comes out, sits on your face like he's told, twists your tits, makes you lick his 18 blue tattoos, fucks you silly, then takes off with a kidcunt who wants to rob you. I could," Reliable said, "become more cynical."

"Disgusting," I said.

"That, my friend," Old Reliable said, "is what the world is about. Finding new ways to be disgusting."

"Why do people want to be disgusting?"

"Because it proves they're BAD."

"You set yourself up every time you go down on one of those fuckers."

"I'll let you in on a little secret of why I like what I like and do what other guys only beat off to thinking about doing with bad boys. I'm like every other sexual specialist. I'm 80-percent impotent unless I get sex my way, unless I'm with these ex-con biker boys. Prison turns out some of the best trade in the country."

"You're going to use up your karma," I said. "Danger."

"So I'm an easy mark for ex-cons. Still I have to judge each one on his own merits. I know my sexual preference sets me up for everything from an easy touch for a few bucks to a full-dress armed robbery with a side-order of a stomping and maybe a murder. Mine."

"You have sex with them. You pay them. You yourself have nothing. You're poor. A starving artist."

"I have only a relative nothing," Reliable said. "If I have 15 bucks, and Buster and Billie have 37 cents, then *they* have nothing. For my 15 bucks I could get killed." He looked contemplatively around his early-Salvation-Army apartment recalling the armies that have marched over him. "Actually, for about 50 bucks, you can get anybody offed."

"You always talk that badass gangtalk from the bad company you hire."

"Ah, gangs. Disgusting, ain't I? Those wonderful prison-gang initiations. First you have to get tattooed. Then, like in the Aryan Brotherhood, they send you out to 'stick a nigger.' Everybody's disgusting. You know, of course, I know how to do away with violence in prisons."

"So go tell Governor Jerry Brown."

"Ha. Segregate them. Segregated prisons. I've been to bed with men from every pen in the country, coast to coast, and bed is the only true confessional. I have maybe one good point to me: I listen to what they tell me. Just segregate the goddamn prisons."

"You, your karma, and Buster and Billie. Now segregation. When you don't answer your phone, I figure I better come down and discover your body. Why do you keep doing this?"

"Why do you keep touring prisons like some fucking prison-tour junkie?"

Touche. We both laughed. We knew. The answer was in our pants.

At the musical show the night of that San Quentin tour the country-western band had twanged out a number called “Ladies Love Outlaws Like Little Boys Love Puppy Dogs.”

Old Reliable O’Riley and I may not be puppies, but we know authentic *macho* when we sniff it.

### III. *Virtual Drummer, Analog Drummer*

I wrote the following book review in 1978 for *Drummer*, because one of several of the Danny Lyon’s photographs would have made an excellent *Drummer* cover justified by the review. But this essay was never published in *Drummer*. The review offers a homomasculine “take” on the straight coffee-table photography book, *Conversations with the Dead: Photography of Prison Life with the Letters and Drawings of Billy McCune*, by Danny Lyon, Holt Paperback, \$6.95. My review was published in *Man2Man* Quarterly #7, July-September, 1981, and in my on-going “Mantalk” column in *Inches* magazine, Volume 1, Number 1, 1985.

My bet on Danny Lyon was safe as my bet on Mapplethorpe. In *The New Yorker*, April 17, 2006, a page fourteen notice about the Danny Lyon show opening at the Houk gallery praised his photos of prisoners, motorcycle bikers, drag queens, and blue-collar folk (think of part of the “bear mystique”) which “make a solid case for Lyon as the natural heir of Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, and Henri Cartier-Bresson.”

Young Men behind Bars

Danny Lyon’s *Conversations with the Dead*

A 1978 book review by Jack Fritscher

*Conversations with the Dead: Photography of Prison Life with the Letters and Drawings of Billy McCune*, Danny Lyon, Holt Paperback, 1971, \$6.95

Six years have passed since I met Danny Lyon [in 1972]. At that time, he was working on a short color film about young men and their tattoos—logical territory for an award-winning straight photographer whose work features biker boys and prison punks. Lyon’s book, *Conversations with the Dead; Photography of Prison Life*, despite its gloomy title, is a classic documentary of young stuff doing time in a hard place. In this instance, the place is the Texas Department of Corrections and the subjects are insouciant redneck white boys, muscular southern blacks, and young macho Hispanics.

Danny Lyon’s heteromasculine eye knows how to catch in prison precisely the kind of attitude that Old Reliable’s homomasculine eye has been catching on the streets for years: tattoos, muscles, mud, sweat, and tears. From films like *Brubaker* and *Penitentiary* and Miguel Pinero’s *Short Eyes*, we have learned the Look of young men behind bars. From documentaries

like PBS's prison special, *Tattoo Tears*, we all understand that in America punishment is often the crime, even when the objects of its abuse are attractive, dangerous, young men whose come-hither looks make you, against your better judgment, want to invite them into your lovely home.

*Conversations with the Dead* is a peephole into the male life of prison: the most macho environment in the world! Lyon's book contains more than 100 photos shot inside six Texas penitentiaries.

Free to roam the prisons, day or night, Danny moved among the prisoners in groups and in isolation. He photographed seductive young toughies in their cells, in the muddy fields, in the strip-showers, in the iron-pumping muscle-yards. He captures angels with dirty faces, incredible stripped young bodies, and the fucking essence of the drawling redneck guards who have these inmates under their total control.

In the course of his unprecedented journey through the Texas prison system, Danny met Billy McCune, who at age 21, handcuffed and tried in chains for a rape he probably did not commit, was sentenced to die in the Texas electric chair.

Billy was placed in the county courthouse to await execution. One evening, he cut off his penis to the root, and placing it in a cup, passed it between the bars to a guard. So to the heart of sexuality is crime and punishment. McCune lived and was not executed. His paintings and sensitive writings are appended to *Conversations*.

"I never lived in the prisons," Danny told me. "I only visited them, usually arriving in time to ride out to the hot fields with the line crew. I made a point to go where the imprisonment was dramatic. I tried to make a picture in the book of imprisonment as distressing as I knew it to be in reality." And he might have added, as engaging, hot, and sexy as it is in reality.

Prison is a terror, a madhouse, a warehouse of men.

This book is important for the library of any man who appreciates males.

In the prison warehouse of young men lies the essence of what so many of us look for when we cruise mean streets looking for the cool black stud who knows how to thrill us with his big black dick, for the blond Appalachian kid whose lean hard body promises all the pleasure that can be found in his blue-veined cock, and for the tattooed Chicano who means business when he flips out the long brown hose of his uncut meat.

Seriously, Danny Lyon is proof that a straight photographer can shoot photos of other men who are straight, and the photos are all considered to be straight. However, a gay photographer's work, no matter his intent, is always judged to be gay.

Check out the two photos published with this review. Lyon's "Young Boss" is a uniformed, tough, husky, redneck cowboy, a prison guard with a gold wedding band and cigar and a pair of aggressive shit-kicking boots pointed right into the camera, with the "Young Boss" sitting on horseback across a leather saddle.

Lyon's "Return from the Fields" is Exhibit A of the precise kind of mud-buddy homomascularity, stripped to the waist, that this [*Man2Man*] magazine is about in the first place.

Study Danny Lyon with some pot-n-poppers, and a little grease on your palm, and you'll get the hyper-male essence of his photographs.

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Unfortunately, *Conversations with the Dead* is out of print, and the publisher has no intention of reprinting. That's often the way with books whose male heat straights either don't understand, or are afraid of. That's also what makes *Conversations* one of those books worth searching used bookstores for. Lucky me: Danny Lyon autographed my copy—and it comes out from under lock-and-key about one night a month!

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