

Stunning Omission

Written March-April 1977, this letter to the editor was published in *Drummer* 15, May 1977.

- I. Author's Eyewitness Historical-Context Introduction written March 12, 1999
- II. The letter to the editor as published in *Drummer* 15, May 1977

I. Author's Eyewitness Historical-Context Introduction written March 12, 1999

Editor's Note: Jack Fritscher, the founding San Francisco editor in chief of *Drummer* magazine, met John Embry, the founding Los Angeles publisher, in March 1977, and worked with him, and observed him, during nearly thirty years, including twenty years after their *Drummer* partnership, writing for Embry's twenty-first-century magazines *Manifest Reader*, *Manhood Rituals*, and *Super MR*. Only two people were editor in chief of *Drummer*: Jeanne Barney and Jack Fritscher. I myself have been an eyewitness of Fritscher and *Drummer* since 1979. In fact, I met Fritscher at the precise moment in 1979 when he had edited half the *Drummer* issues in existence.

Fritscher was editor in chief of *Drummer* for three years, for thirty-two intense and seminal months: March 1977 to December 31, 1979. During this formative time as script-doctor, he was the sub-rosa editor in chief ghost-editing *Drummer* 14 to 18. He edited *Drummer* 19-30 as well as his hybrid issues, *Drummer* 31, 32, 33, plus his special extra issue, *Son of Drummer* (September 1978). He was a steady force of continuity through the *sturm und drang* of all three owner/publishers of *Drummer*. He was *Drummer*'s most frequent contributing writer and photographer for 65 of the 214 issues during three publishers over 25 years.

He is the historian of *Drummer*'s institutional memory.

—Mark Henry, *The Drummer Salon* in the introduction to *Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer*

Before my friend Al Shapiro became art director whose first work appeared in *Drummer* 17 (July 1977), he had introduced me to publisher John Embry in March 1977. During that spring, *Drummer* was hysterical, and arriving in bits and pieces from LA, fleeing for sanctuary in San Francisco

where porn-refugee Embry, driven out of town by the LAPD, set up his home and a temporary *Drummer* office at 311 California Street. Traveling between two cities, while trying to escape one and set up business in the other, Embry produced his “first hybrid LA-San Francisco issue” with *Drummer* 12 (February 1977). When I met him in March he had completely deleted *Drummer’s* founding Los Angeles editor in chief Jeanne Barney who had exited after editing *Drummer* 11. (Barney and I were the only two people who were titled editor in chief of *Drummer*; all the others were listed as associate editors, managing editors, and, sometimes, simply as editor.)

In that March 1977, Embry hired me immediately to help him anchor the refugee *Drummer* in San Francisco. Before my name appeared as editor in chief on the masthead of *Drummer* 19, I was a kind of ghost-writer, kind of a ghost-editor, kind of a script-doctor trying to fix the magazine (issues 14-18) broken by the April 1976 raid by the LAPD acting like the Keystone Cops.

At that time, I had a proper job, a real writing career as full-time manager of a writing staff of ten people at Kaiser Engineers (one of whom, John Trojanski, I recruited to freelance in *Drummer* with articles and photography). I had no intention of quitting a great job in the straight world to take on a fun job in the gay world. In fact, the whole time I was editor in chief of *Drummer* from March 1977 to December 31, 1979, I also kept my career at Kaiser Engineers, which, luckily, assigned me as the managing writer on a task force at the San Francisco Municipal Railway (MUNI). Our startup of the light-rail-vehicle (LRV) program, the new Muni subway and surface system, was run out of the main Muni office only seven minutes from the *Drummer* office.

In short, not depending on *Drummer* for income, I was free to experiment and to grow *Drummer*. That made me bolder than Embry who needed *Drummer* to pay his bills and buy his cheese. I never expected to live off my writing because I noticed a trend that most writers and photographers and artists who try to earn their living off their art very often compromise the honesty of that art in order to please a patron, or an editor, or the public. The only intimate friends I’ve known who became rich because of their talent were David Hurler aka Old Reliable, and my bicoastal lover Robert Mapplethorpe who never compromised his vision even while he waltzed pertinent patrons around the floor.

With a real job, I could afford to envision the risk of making *Drummer* be *avant garde* and dangerous and fun; Embry saw *Drummer* as a business, and as a glorified mail-order catalog selling cock rings and amyl nitrite. Like a salesman pitching with jokes, he preferred camp humor about leather. Much like Jeanne Barney considering *Drummer* a kind

of leather *Evergreen Review*, I envisioned literary erotica and new photographs of the newly uncloseted masculine-identified gay men signified by the leather life emerging in a homosexual culture dominated by drag and petulant sissiness.

I was first published in 1957, twenty years before Embry hired me. Writers, like actors, mostly always have experience in holding two jobs at once; it's the nature of the vocation. Embry rather liked that I had a job and an income independent of him. Maybe he thought I wouldn't pressure him to be paid as did the others — until I did demand he pay me back wages and we fell out in autumn 1979.

My straight job gave me also a kind of intellectual independence from him. I could dare stand up to him when other staff had to salute and say *yessir*.

Fresh from the front lines of civil-rights and anti-war activism in the 1960s, and as a founding member of the American Popular Culture Association in 1969, I wanted to buff up the potential of *Drummer* to capture realistically the first gay decade after Stonewall.

I set about studying page after page of each existing issue (*Drummer* 1 to *Drummer* 15), searching the internal evidence in the magazine to find if *Drummer* had a “voice” or not. By *Drummer* 21, which I think is the most perfect issue of *Drummer*, the new and distinctive *Drummer* voice was speaking to the decade.

I felt in my guts what a jumble *Drummer* had been in LA and I figured in my cock what a giant it could become in San Francisco.

My longtime friend Al Shapiro, the artist A. Jay, who did not have a day job, had gone ahead full-time on *Drummer* as art director while I reconnoitered as a ghost-editor producing this and doctoring that and recruiting friends as contributors. Al said: “I’m pasting up the last pages and I don’t have enough for the ‘Letters to the Editor’ column.” Al and I were flying by the seat of our pants; Embry was too often gone making round trips to LA to complete his move. As a clue to who did what in *Drummer*, it should be noted that whenever *Drummer* had no editor, the editor listed on the masthead defaulted to publisher John Embry’s alter-ego “Robert Payne” — an S&M-pun a bit less corny than “Dick Payne.” Embry, fresh from Hollywood, knew that whenever a writer’s real name is deleted from the screen credits for whatever reason, the custom is always to substitute the code name of the anonymous “Alan Smithee.”

“Robert Payne” was the “Alan Smithee” of *Drummer*.

With this “Robert Payne” persona, he covered the void between the time that Jeanne Barney had dumped him and the time that I was coming on board at a disintegrating magazine that had no San Francisco office.

Drummer 15 was a shameful issue assembled from file-drawer bits by Embry. The rotten core of *Drummer 15* exhibited how desperate Embry was insofar as the issue consisted of three articles ghosted by “Robert Payne” who had seemingly cribbed them from straight men’s magazines and books. Two pieces that seemed blatant plagiarism in *Drummer 14* were “The Third Degree” and “The Foreign Legion,” and in *Drummer 15*, “Devil’s Island” and “The Greek Way.”

In *Drummer 15*, I took the opportunity of the “Letters to the Editor,” whom I imagined to be my new employer Embry, to address a little critique of what alternatives I thought worked or might work in *Drummer*.

In the letter, seconding the *Drummer* interest in pop-culture movies, particularly with S&M themes, I actively suggested some real-world standards for giving proper credit to gay artists, as well as for raising the level of presentation of art and criticism. This little letter recapped my March 1977 talks with John Embry about the direction I intended to drive *Drummer*.

Drummer 15 was one of the sad “transition issues” tossed together partly in LA, and finished off in its new home in San Francisco at 311 California Street.

Drummer 12 through *Drummer 18* were “California Street *Drummer*.”

This is the timeline of that period: Beginning in March-April 1977, I was sub-rosa editor in chief working out of my home at 4436 25th Street because Embry was still working out of his 311 California Street address. While he searched for a San Francisco office, I studied *Drummer* and initiated my editorial make-over on theoretical and practical fronts.

My first *writing* in *Drummer* appeared in *Drummer 14* (April 1977) when I produced and wrote “Men South of Market,” page 46.

- My first *byline* was in *Drummer 18* (August 1977) when I produced Jim Stewart’s photography for, and wrote, “The Leatherneck Bar,” pages 82-85.
- My first *photograph* appeared in *Drummer 20* (January 1978), page 10.
- I worked on the intermediate issues, *Drummer 14* to *Drummer 18*, assuming with each issue more responsibilities such as producing, script-doctoring, and ghost-editing.
- Hiatus! Four months! Because *Drummer* was nearly dead in its emergency transplant from LA, Shapiro and Embry and I put the magazine on a four-month hiatus without any new issues from August to December 1977.

- That hiatus ended when I produced my first full solo issue, credited on the masthead as editor in chief, with *Drummer* 19 (December 1977).

Drummer 19 to *Drummer* 31 — “Divisadero Street *Drummer*” — were created by Al Shapiro and me at 1730 Divisadero Street. The second-floor office was a makeshift dump stacked up and spilling over in a walk-up flat in a dirty old Victorian. We were young; we laughed; we smoked dope; we fucked. We were part of the 1970s Gay Renaissance of writers, artists, and photographers who had converged on San Francisco.

Having known each other for several years before *Drummer* was invented in 1975, Al Shapiro and I were feeling our way toward a needed new identity for the dying *Drummer*. There had been so much trouble and infighting around the young *Drummer* in LA that after the “Slave Auction” arrest by the LAPD, *Drummer* very nearly did not survive the acrimonious divorce among all the LA personalities who had worked on LA *Drummer*. In fact, some of that acrimony exists into this century among the original LA principals who, like dinosaurs surviving the crunch, lunch — despite their differences and their advanced ages.

Because of the on-going legal problems after the arrest, Embry several times had to return to court hearings in LA. In addition, he was trying to crush Jeanne Barney in a struggle over who owned the classified personals section “The Leather Fraternity.” Under the stress of fleeing LA, *Drummer* in 1977 was comatose when we San Franciscans took over and administered CPR. *Drummer* had landed on the yellow-brick road in Oz and we gave it a heart, courage, and a brain.

And a dick.

Having been preoccupied with his move which distracted him a bit from *Drummer* in 1977, Embry went virtually missing from *Drummer* for nearly half a year from late 1978 to mid 1979 because of a near-death experience with cancer, its onset and remedy. I visited him in hospital and brought him a goldfish in a bowl. Is kindness weakness? He rather expected Al Shapiro and me to continue the kind of creamed corn, 1950s gossipy, campy, and sometimes drag materials he famously favored.

Embry’s drag cover of the “Cycle Sluts” on *Drummer* 9 created a huge controversy, and to this day remains a scandal and a blot on *Drummer* history as well as an absolute dipstick of why Embry, who advertised Naugahyde (!) vinyl sheets for sale in *Drummer*, was really quite unsuited to helm *Drummer* for eleven years of its twenty-four-year run, and for ninety-eight of its 214 issues which his regime made more “commercial” than “cutting edge.”

Had Embry been left to his own devices, *Drummer* would have died after issue 11 when Jeanne Barney exited.

Al Shapiro and I had a new 1970s vision for “San Francisco *Drummer*.” We wanted to make the pages reflect the heights to which gay sex culture was rising in San Francisco and New York where we both had been playing with leather, S&M, and art since the early 1960s.

During Embry’s long absence, we set our sites on a high concept of *Drummer* as a magazine using leather as a hook and metaphor for presenting the breadth of homomale identity, culture, and sex play.

We both knew armies of masculine gays who were sophisticated and sexual, and we wanted to reflect them, so we could reflect the reader to himself, or to a new liberated “identity image” of himself.

No longer was *Drummer* to be an LA rag preoccupied by LA concerns. If San Francisco *Drummer* was to survive, a whole new national and, eventually, international, team had to be recruited to fill its pages, and that was quite fun for Al Shapiro and me to do: one at a time, bed after bed, bath after bath, club after club, friend after friend.

That’s how we created the *Drummer* salon that created *Drummer*.

Recruitment was essential, because it wasn’t every day that a fully functioning artist like photographer Robert Mapplethorpe walked into the *Drummer* offices (and fell into my bed for two years).

Unlike the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, when everyone with a laptop is a “writer,” and everyone with a digital web-camera is a “photographer,” in the Titanic 70s, even actual writers and real photographers were so swept away by the glorious availability of sex that they were not producing on any dependable schedule.

I had to beg friends, acquaintances, and fuck buddies for material for *Drummer* the way A. Jay requested this letter to the editor from me.

Surprisingly, something as thin as this little letter was the Trojan horse I rode into *Drummer* where, at first, I had not known I was to change anything.

Finally, apropos this letter to the editor, the average *Drummer* reader in the 1970s knew popular culture and was hot for the much-talked-about military, uniform, and torture film, *The Battle of Algiers* (1966). Director Gillo Pontecorvo was nominated for an Academy Award as best director for this black-and-white epic shot in an extremely real documentary style (*cinema verite*) depicting the Algerian revolution against the French colonial army. Driven from Vietnam in the 1950s, the French had something to prove in Algeria, and they did it with amazing scenes of classic torture which inspired Algerian guerillas to place small terrorist bombs under tables in crowded cafes. *Time* magazine noted ominously in 1966 that *The Battle of Algiers* had the distinction of introducing bombing as a means of

political protest. *The Battle of Algiers*, a truly great film, appeared early in the American Vietnam War, and helped galvanize anti-war protests as did Pontecorvo's later 1969 film titled *Z*. It's almost too easy to make the point that Americans driven from Vietnam in 1975 had something to prove in Iraq.

Since 1966, I have kept near my desk a paperback of the screenplay and photographs from *The Battle of Algiers* which so greatly influenced my kind of first-person documentary writing in *Drummer*.

Two films that come close to the intense torture scenes of *Algiers* are Charles Bronson's perfect B-movie *The Evil That Men Do* (1984), and director Luiz Sergio Person's Brazilian film *The Case of the Naves Brothers* (1967) which I saw at the Carnegie Hall Cinema in New York before every print of it mysteriously disappeared.

Note added June 30, 2001. The soap-opera history of what happened with creativity and cash at *Drummer* was rerun twenty years later in 2001 when legal and cash troubles destroyed *Bear* magazine. Publisher Bear-Dog Hoffman lost his entire Brush Creek Media empire of video and magazine production when the IRS, reporting a debt of \$55,000, closed Hoffman's office doors at 367 Ninth Street, San Francisco, on June 20, 2001. Less than two years earlier, *Drummer* had closed Folsom Fair weekend, September 1999. This eyewitness participant knows that anyone who tries to live off gay art, writing, photography, or publishing has never heard Tennessee Williams' warning: "You can be young without money, but you can't be old without money."

For a detailed eyewitness narrative of how geography, ego, arrests, LA debris, money, greed, murder, hubris, and sex affected *Drummer* while I was its editor in chief, see the narrative history part of this *Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer* titled *The Drummer Salon*.

II. The letter to the editor as published in *Drummer* 15, May 1977

Letter to the Editor

Stunning Omission

Gentlemen:

My congratulations to you on your magnificent "Movie Mayhem" series. I really look forward each new issue of *Drummer* to see what other

examples Allen Eagles [the *Drummer* reviewer in LA] has dug up. But there was one stunning omission in your Volume 2, Number 13, chapter of “Movie Mayhem.”

The Battle of Algiers was not widely circulated. Perhaps it is still regarded as an art movie. But it vividly depicted the attempts that the French forces made to extract information from the Algerian captives. The captives were trussed up, beaten, and subjected to electrical shocks [on their genitals]. And all this was shown on screen. If Mr. Eagles has not yet seen *The Battle of Algiers*, I urge him to seek out the film.

My special congratulations to you for unearthing an artist as talented as the one who did the drawing which appeared on page 11 of Volume 2, Number 13. It is the most stunning physique art work I have seen in some time. The action taking place is imaginative; the drawing is superb; the contrast between the youthful “M” and the macho “S” is well-drawn and the little touches, like the phallic symbol sticking out of the ground all help to make the drawing a masterpiece.

Unfortunately, the artist is not identified on the page [and thus begins a long *Drummer* tradition of failure to credit the talent]. I would love to know who the artist is, whether he is offering work commercially, and whether or not he is accepting commissions. To facilitate a reply, I have enclosed a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

Thanks again for the high quality of the work you put out. Have Eagles continue to feed us more “Movie Mayhem.” And let’s show more of the work of the aforementioned artist. —Fred, Forest Park, IL [Coded with my father’s middle name, Fred, and with Illinois, my home state, and Forest Park, near the campus where I attended graduate school.]