

Who Lit up the “Lit” of the Golden Age of *Drummer*?

by Larry Townsend

When *Drummer* was founded in 1975, publisher John Embry was nearing fifty; editor in chief Jeanne Barney was thirtysomething; Jack Fritscher was thirty-six; and I was forty-five. My personal eyewitness of *Drummer*'s invention began when I met John Embry in 1972 when I was president of Homophile Effort for Legal Protection (H.E.L.P.), Inc. in Los Angeles. John had just returned from Hawaii where he had lived for several years selling advertising. He immediately became so interested in H.E.L.P. that I gladly handed over to him the production of our newsletter. A couple years later when he succeeded me as president of the organization, he tried to change our *H.E.L.P. Newsletter* into a less political and more leather-social newspaper that he called *H.E.L.P. Drummer*.

Its tabloid format looked like Dick Saunders' 1960s *Frontier Bulletin Gazette*, like Dick Michaels' 1970s *The Advocate*, and like the *Bay Area Reporter* in San Francisco. John's hybrid ran for several issues, but it never really worked because John wanted a real leather magazine, and this was not always politically compatible with our group's organizational purposes. At that time, when gay liberation was still fighting in the trenches against forces like the LAPD, H.E.L.P. was basically involved in protecting gay men from entrapment, and with paying bail after arrests. H.E.L.P. had the largest membership of any secular gay group in Los Angeles. Only Ray Broshears' Metropolitan Community Church had more members.

John stepped down from the H.E.L.P. leadership and from editing *H.E.L.P. Drummer* so he could start up the slick magazine format dedicated to the kind of leather content that up to then had only been done in onesies and twosies—and never monthly—by publishers like Bob Mizer with *Physique Pictorial* at AMG in LA, and Chuck Renslow with *Raw* at Kris Studio in Chicago. (In 1972, there was also a one-time leather photography magazine produced out of San Francisco called *Whipcrack* that Jack Fritscher had produced.) John asked several people including myself, Jeanne Barney, Fred Halsted, and Robert Opel to come in with him. (Jeanne wrote for the original *The Advocate* penning her column “Smoke from Jeanne's Lamp.”) I declined because I am mainly known as a novelist and I did not want to involve myself with a monthly publication

stressed by a due date every thirty days. I had experienced that kind of pressure, on a much smaller scale, with the *H.E.L.P. Newsletter*.

So John embarked on his new venture with (to me) an unlikely assortment of people. ('Nuff said on that score.) Still, despite any number of problems, he got the magazine off the ground and seemed to be doing well with its mail-order and subscriptions until, when *Drummer* was not quite a year old, he decided to host a charity "Slave Auction" in April 1976. This was almost the end of *Drummer*, because the LAPD raided the event, "freed the slaves," and afterward hassled John and the tiny *Drummer* staff so badly that by February 1977 John fled to San Francisco where he hired Jack Fritscher as editor in chief.

I could write a novel on this publishing and arrest drama, but during those five years from 1975 to 1980, John and I were on bad terms and I was not privy to every detail due to the love-hate relationship that has always dogged John's and my friendship. My estrangement from John kept me aloof from *Drummer*, which, thankfully kept me from attending his "Slave Auction" where I would have been arrested along with John himself, his lover Mario Simon, Fred Halsted, Val Martin, and forty others. The only top *Drummer* personality not arrested was Bob Opel who so much loved being arrested that on other occasions he mooned LAPD Chief Ed Davis and streaked Elizabeth Taylor at the Academy Awards. My longtime friend Jeanne Barney was the only woman present at the great arrest. As the cops were hauling her off to jail one of them asked if she was a real woman, to which she made her classic response: "Of course I'm a real woman; if I were a drag, I'd have bigger tits."

During the several months after the "Slave Auction," the LAPD harassed the *Drummer* staff—tailing them on foot and in cars, tapping their phones, and raiding the tiny *Drummer* office allegedly (according to the search warrant) to find and confiscate copies of the straight porn film, *Behind the Green Door*. They never found anything, but they managed to totally disrupt the magazine's production to say nothing of terrorizing the few employees who were brave enough to stick it out. Attorney Al Gordon, a mutual friend of John's and mine was defending them against all of this, but he told me how frustrating it was to have the LAPD and the district attorney's office constantly seeking some new way to inconvenience John and his mail-order business. That was of concern to me because of my own mail-order business selling my books. At the urging of several of his friends, John decided to relocate outside the repressive jurisdiction of the Los Angeles authorities who constantly raided leather bars and outlawed theater screenings of gay films by *Drummer* contributors Fred Halsted (*LA Plays Itself, Sextool*) and Terry LeGrand and Roger Earl (*Born to Raise Hell*).

I remember it was over a period of months, maybe February to May 1977, that John—minus his LA staff—fled with van load after van load to the freedom of the City by the Bay. He took his personality with him, and, as some have alleged, his LA “style”—maybe fueled with anger over being arrested and “exiled”—made his acceptance in laid-back San Francisco problematic. He needed a local envoy and editor who could recruit for him a new talent pool for *Drummer*. When John hired Al Shapiro as art director, Al suggested John interview his friend Jack Fritscher who had twenty years of magazine experience. The three of them transformed LA *Drummer* into San Francisco *Drummer* which by some alchemy made the magazine international.

Then bad luck hit. Within eighteen months, John was struck with colon cancer that took him out for months and, for a second time, almost killed *Drummer*. Was there a psychosomatic cause from the stress of the arrests, the harassment, the move, the sheer pressure of monthly publishing? It was here that Jack Fritscher rode to the rescue—the proverbial hero in the white hat (and black leather chaps). As editor in chief, his uncompromising drive to produce a magazine by, for, and about masculine leathermen built perfectly on, and enlarged, John Embry’s original conception. (Only two people were titled “editor in chief” of *Drummer*: Jeanne Barney and Jack Fritscher. All the rest were titled “editor” only.) In March 1977, Fritscher began working behind the scenes as a producer drumming up talent and topics for *Drummer* beginning in issues 14 or 15 and ghost-editing *Drummer* 18 before coming out as editor in chief, I remember, with the Christmas issue, *Drummer* 19.

As a writer and observer, I agree that the period 1977 to 1980 when Jack Fritscher was editor was the “Golden Age” of *Drummer*. My opinion might seem gratuitous or coincidental until a person studies the 1970s issues, like *Drummer* 21, in which Jack wrote so many articles and shot so many cover photographs, centerfolds, and interior photo spreads. In addition, he turned his circle of friends, like Robert Mapplethorpe and Old Reliable and a renewed Robert Opel, into the *Drummer* talent pool Embry had hired Jack to recruit. Jack was not a fan of the “camp” in LA *Drummer*, particularly John’s cartoon balloons pasted on sex pictures. Jack, like the *Drummer* readership who complained in Letters to the Editor, declared the gender-fuck cover of the “Cycle Sluts” on *Drummer* 9 as the worst *Drummer* cover ever. Dumping camp, and widening the demographic of leather, Jack introduced “theme” issues like bondage, prisons, rough trade, and fetishes like cigars. “If, for instance,” Jack once told a leather audience at a reading, “the 1964 Beatles and the 1967 Beatles were analogous to *Drummer* magazine, LA *Drummer* would have been the teen-hit singles on the album, *Meet the Beatles*, and San Francisco

Drummer would have been the high-concept album, *Sgt. Pepper*.” When Embry was ill and absent, Fritscher not only shouldered the load, he and, I think, Al Shapiro, pushed out even further the envelope of *Drummer*.

Drummer moved from its first LA popularity into being sold all across the country by subscription and in some leather stores. I remember in 1979 when I was doing a reading and signing my novels at A Different Light in Silver Lake, the store manager Richard Labonté told me he had tripled his *Drummer* order during Fritscher’s tenure as editor. Despite this amazing success, few readers knew the problems inside *Drummer* ranging from John’s extended illness to money problems with distributors and censorship caused by do-gooders like Anita Bryant and John Briggs that curtailed sales in retail outlets. I can’t speak for all the *Drummer* contributors I knew in LA, but Jeanne and Fred Halsted and, I think, Ed Franklin, had quit John Embry because of creative differences and business ethics differences. Halsted started his own magazine called *Package*.

In 1978, I drove to San Francisco and met Jack for the first time face to face. We had talked on the phone and I certainly knew his writing. He took me to his favorite Italian restaurant called the Haystack on 24th Street near Castro Street where we compared notes and he asked me to consider writing for *Drummer* even though he warned me of what I knew: that John Embry was very lax in paying the talent. Because of the old tension between John Embry and me, I held off until the 1980s when I first began contributing to *Drummer* in trade for advertising rather than money.

Unlike Jack and John, I was never “a *Drummer* writer.” I am a novelist whose novels were often excerpted in *Drummer* and a columnist published for a dozen years in *Drummer* before I sold my “Leather Notebook” column to *Honcho*. I was outside the inner orbit even after John and I buried the hatchet after his illness in 1980. I never pushed *Drummer* the way Jack pushed it and formulated concepts for entire issues. His writing, as well as the direction he gave other contributors, pushed *Drummer* through its initial leather-only phase into an era of many fetishes and into masculinity.

Readers (including myself) found his changes so gradual, and so natural it was hard to imagine his upgrades were not all part of John’s original grand scheme. In other words, I feel that Jack’s work in keeping *Drummer* alive and interjecting his own ideas into it advanced John’s initial conceptions beyond its original scope.

What Jack accomplished was, in effect, the expansion of the vision John had tried to achieve—and which circumstances had prevented John from doing. Under Jack Fritscher’s guidance, *Drummer* became one of the important icons of San Francisco’s Golden 70s. When Jack and John parted company over financial matters, John never once regretted the

changes Jack wrought or the writings he wrote. In fact, after Jack left *Drummer*, John frequently reprised many of Jack's themes and fetishes in *Drummer* and in his post-*Drummer* magazines like *MR* where he asked Jack for reprint permission.

Timeline detectives may note that while John owned *Drummer* for eleven years, Jack Fritscher wrote and photographed for *Drummer* for seventeen years through three owners. Jack's last issue for John Embry was 32 or 33, and he returned after John sold *Drummer* with issue 98, and continued contributing to the end, appearing in something like nearly seventy issues.

Fritscher, like me, also really cannot be defined or limited as "a *Drummer* writer." While I think that as interesting and occasionally as brilliant as Jack's writings were within the covers of *Drummer*, he has produced a far more significant body of writing and photography on his own in gay and straight publishing. He is a writer who is a stylist, and his style defines him. He brushed his signature style onto the blank pages of *Drummer* and into his *Drummer* novel *Some Dance to Remember*. It's there the way it is in his first S&M novel written in 1969, *I Am Curious (Leather)*. He tried to make *Drummer* literary and sexy, and he worked under pressure of deadlines which is the thing I told John Embry at the start of *Drummer* I would not do.

Over the years, many *Drummer* editors would call Jack and say there was a hole in the next issue and could he write them a cover feature article in four days. His style is grace under pressure. In his books like the wild and dirty biography, *Mapplethorpe: Assault with a Deadly Camera*, I see the fingerprints of his *Drummer* experience because he often composes in single sentence paragraphs to keep the reader's eye going down the column of print. So, in essence, I think we have to recognize that the glory years of golden sexuality, especially in San Francisco, coincided with the Golden Age of *Drummer*, and this was largely due to the hard work and extraordinary talents of Jack Fritscher who, crediting all the contributors, told me if it takes a village to raise a child, it took all us village people to fill *Drummer*.

Larry Townsend (born 1930) is the pseudonymous author of dozens of books including *Run Little Leather Boy* (1970) and *The Leatherman's Handbook* (1972) at pioneer erotic presses such as Greenleaf Classics and the Other Traveler imprint of Olympia Press. Growing up as a teenager of Swiss-German extraction in Los Angeles a few houses from Noel Coward and Irene Dunne, he ate cookies with his neighbor Laura Hope Crews who was Aunt Pittypat in *Gone with the Wind*. He attended the presti-

gious Peddie School, and was stationed as Staff Sergeant in charge of NCOIC Operations of Air Intelligence Squadrons for nearly five years with the US Air Force in Germany (1950-1954). Completing his tour of duty, he entered into the 1950s underground of the LA leather scene where he and Montgomery Clift shared a lover. With his degree in industrial psychology from UCLA (1957), he worked in the private sector and as a probation officer with the Forestry Service. He began his pioneering activism in the politics of gay liberation in the early 1960s. In 1972, as president of the Homophile Effort for Legal Protection which had been founded in 1969 to defend gays during and after arrests, he introduced John Embry to the *H.E.L.P. Newsletter*, the forebear of *Drummer* (1975). Fearing shoddy gay business practices, he cautioned Embry not to allow H.E.L.P. to fall into bankruptcy. As the longtime friend of Jeanne Barney, who was the founding Los Angeles editor in chief of *Drummer*, he is an essential eyewitness of the drama and salon around *Drummer* in which his novels were frequently excerpted. His signature “Leather Notebook” column appeared in *Drummer* for twelve years beginning in 1980.



“Larry Townsend,” Fritscher-Henry House,
June 16, 1995. Photograph by Jack Fritscher.
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