

7 IN A BARN AND 40 IN THE STABLE

J. Brian Donohue
Golden Boys' Golden Daddy
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Gay films of the 1970s are lightning caught in a jar...

In San Francisco on Tuesday, April 29, 1980, I met with my friend, male madam and film director and publisher J. Brian, at his Castro district home at 36 Camp Street where we chatted about his “J. Brian Modeling Agency” and his *Golden Boys* magazine while paging through his three-ring binders filled with his nude photos of his stable of summer-blond boys-for-hire whom Brian procured for cautious clients such as Rock Hudson and other celebrities on tour. Because I was the editor-in-chief of *Drummer* magazine, Jeremiah “Jerry” Brian had decided I should interview him, and then he said he liked the way I “drew him out” and asked me to collaborate on his upcoming new screenplay *J. Brian's Flashbacks*, as well as to write my novelization of that film whose six sequences were serialized in twin bills with dozens of his photographs in three issues of *Honcho* (April, May, June 1982) and again in six issues of the *California Action Guide* (June–December 1982).

Our relationship was warm. It helped that we had comrades in arms. Encouraged by our mutual friend, the literary porn author, Samuel Steward, who enjoyed the services of Brian's rough hustlers, Brian had adapted the ancient gay folk tale, *Seven in a Barn*, that in constantly retyped carbon copies—a kind of porno Pyramid Scheme of reproduction—had circulated in the erotic underground closet of forbidden gay folk literature for centuries. Against all odds and all denials, the subversive art of pornography always sustains homosexual culture—or what's a Grecian urn?

Steward and Brian were a match in the supply-and-demand world of hustler sex from their first meeting in the 1960s. For all his notoriety, Brian at thirty-eight in 1980 was a wholesome-looking, modest, ruddy-faced, heavy-set, jolly guy with a reddish-blond complexion and hair. The wispy gentleman Sam at seventy-one was in physique a frail twin of either Fred Astaire or a masculine version of that other gay sparrow-boned raconteur, Quentin Crisp. Sam dined out forever on his zero-degrees-of-separation stories about Gertrude Stein, Alice B. Toklas, Thornton Wilder, and Dr. Alfred Kinsey. Sam who bought sex and Brian who sold it were each globally positioned where the latitude of art intersects the longitude of sex. Both enjoyed dropping names as much as dropping pants. Sam orbited his *haute* planet of *Brideshead Revisited* literary friends while Brian's map was more an archipelago of mattresses.

Seven in a Barn in 1971 was Brian's first hit. Shot in 16mm, it was a "talkie" in an age when gay films were mostly silent movies shot in 8mm and dubbed with fake groaning and bad music. Many of Brian's theatrical features were anthology collections of his short film loops originally shot to be sold separately to mail-order customers with Super-8 projectors set up next to their beds.

Think about the internet-like webbing power of 1970s gay mail-order whose existence was a retort to censorship. Each delivery of information and entertainment helped men in the boondocks take one step further out of the closet. In 1965, when the censorious US Postal Service ruled that frontal nudity—as found in publisher Lynn Womack's *Grecian Guild Pictorial* magazine, and in the Mattachine Society's *One* and Clark Polak's *Drum* magazines, and in Bob Mizer's *Physique Pictorial* catalog for his Athletic Model Guild movies—could at last be sent legally through the federal mail, it instantly made the gay mail-order business possible for distribution of magazines like *Drummer* and for films by J. Brian. Even so, when I began my own boutique video company in 1985 during the Reagan regency, it was still illegal by local state and city laws to mail adult materials to the reddest twenty-five percent of the fifty states. In 1986, a year after Brian died, Reagan commissioned the devastating *Meese Report: The Final Report of the Attorney General's Commission on*

Pornography, which was the federal government's desperate last stand to crush us with censorship before the internet changed the game. As late as 1989, seven photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe, condemned as obscene on the floor of the US Senate, were about to go on trial in Cincinnati—where the photos won.

Brian's second 1971 feature, however, was, instead of episodic loops, a single narrative from Sam's novel *\$TUD* that, after a shameful scam of Sam by Womack, Brian published as a book and adapted into his film *Four More Than Money*. In 1972, *Seven in the Barn* was seized by the San Francisco police who arrested Brian in the same citywide sweep of porn directors that busted David Hurles for his Old Reliable Studio hustler photography. Homophobic cops everywhere twisted every law on the books to stop the "Stonewall Effect" of spreading concentric rings of rebellion. In 1973, Brian took an extended vacation to Hawaii to escape virulent policing charges of prostitution—just as *Drummer* three years later fled from Los Angeles to San Francisco to escape ridiculous charges of practicing slavery.

During their several collaborations, Brian adapted Steward's books from page to screen, and Sam wrote his *roman-à-clef*, *Blow for Blow*, about a Brian-like male madam whose life dramatized the heartaches, headaches, betrayals by hustlers, and arrests that Brian had been enduring as a pioneer filmmaker who courageously persisted by creating queer art that by existing resisted homophobia because he believed the truth that his avant-garde gay voice and vision were worth the risks to announce gay identity as a visible human right.

Gay films of the 1970s are like lightning caught in a jar. They illuminate and preserve striking moments of history caught on film where a single frame can be worth a thousand words about the way we were.

Our coming-out endurance in resisting arrests and censorship came from our mutual experiences as erotic artists who happened to be sex workers who hired men who were also sex workers as part of our work creating new visions of homosexuality. We generated personal and fraternal courage as we gay-liberation artists came out and met each other in that first decade after Stonewall. Brian had dared publish some of Sam's "Phil Andros"

stories like “Pig in a Poke” in his *Golden Boys* magazine as early as 1968. I produced Sam’s stories, “Baby Sitter” and “Many Happy Returns” for *Drummer #5* and *Drummer #6* in 1976, and then published his “In a Pig’s Ass” in *Drummer #21* in 1978; and his “Priest: This Is My Body” in *Man2Man Quarterly #2*, December 1980. This interview with J. Brian, titled “Boys for Hire,” focused on the kind of chatty celebrity-gossip information preferred by the subscribers to *Skin*, volume 2, #3, January 1981.

J. Brian: Let me tell you one thing first about running a gay male whorehouse. The week I made the most money was when the American Psychiatric Association met in San Francisco. For that convention, I had to call on extra help. Rich men want big dick on hot men.

Jack Fritscher: You get right to the point.

J. Brian: Nobody ever hired a virgin. In my three years, 1969 to 1972, when I was set up by the cops and busted, nobody, not even my clients who were cops, ever asked for a virgin. So I’m not about to pull punches answering questions.

Jack Fritscher: You’ve shrunk out the shrinks.

J. Brian: The psychological services required of a male madam would fry Freud. You have to profile your house-studs. You have to screen the clients. You have to look after the boys’ blood tests. You have to keep the kooks away from the kids.

Jack Fritscher: Kids?

J. Brian: Young men. Altogether my stable ranged from thirty to forty guys. Hot. Hung. Horny. And most often very smart. About thirty percent were college grads. The rest had a couple years of college under their belts. A third of them were working their way through college. You know: supplementing their income and veteran’s benefits. A couple hours to make a few bucks. Most of them could handle at least one other language. Enough to order from a French menu. Enough to understand an escort date to the San Francisco Opera.

Jack Fritscher: Smart fuckers.

J. Brian: Smart recruitment. I spent \$200 bucks a week advertising for new models in the *Berkeley Barb*. These boys could read. I averaged five to ten phone inquiries a day. I was the

agent-intermediary for the models and for the clients. The models were hung, horny, bright, All-American types.

Jack Fritscher: Agent, huh? Male madam, yes.

J. Brian: Yes. With my agency, nobody ever got stung or hurt. I screened the boys. I screened the men. If you pick up a kid on the street, you don't know what you're getting; and the kid may end up sooner or later dead.

Jack Fritscher: So everybody concerned was fairly well adjusted?

J. Brian: Come on. A well-adjusted person doesn't become a male whore—or a male madam!

Jack Fritscher: You laugh.

J. Brian: Life is for fun. Actually, most of the boys only stayed about six months. That's a healthy length of time to hustle. I worried about guys who wanted to stay longer. You can't fuck-for-cash seven days a week. I closed the place down every Sunday.

Jack Fritscher: Never on Sunday.

J. Brian: Sundays I'd drive the best of the current bunch out to the beach at San Gregorio or Devil's Slide. You gotta get yourself away from business. When you whore, you put your mind in blank while you do it. It doesn't seem serious. It doesn't seem real, although they don't blank out their interpersonal relationships with each other and with me.

Jack Fritscher: The boys got along okay?

J. Brian: They hung out together like a fraternity. They were all using male hustling as a rite of passage in a nation that has lost its sense of definite transition into adulthood.

Jack Fritscher: What makes healthy boys of mid-American parents want to sell their flesh?

J. Brian: Money. In America, money is more of a measure than dick. Of how well you're doing. Of how acceptable you are. Five years after my agency closed, one of my boys told me I had turned his life around. All during high school he had been a fat boy. He felt very unattractive, so he dieted, took up weightlifting, and got himself into good shape which, apparently, I validated through hiring him as a model and featuring him in one of my films. Through hustling, he gained a self-confidence mommy and daddy never gave him. Through professional sex, he became a person.

Jack Fritscher: Just like the Marine Corps builds men.

J. Brian: I agented for 800 young men in three years. So I guess there were at least 800 motives for the boy-next-door to enter the skin-game. They do it for ego and for money.

Jack Fritscher: Your clients. What kind of men pay for sex?

J. Brian: Let me be very clear: nearly all my clients could put on Levi's and a T-shirt and cruise for anything they wanted. The kind of man who hires his sex is a man who's so into his career that he doesn't have time for hit-and-miss cruising. His life is on a tight schedule. Why shouldn't his time-frame for sex be the same?

Jack Fritscher: Profile, if you will, your average client.

J. Brian: Our typical client was a professional: a doctor, lawyer, corporate type, good-looking, well built, working away from home, sent to San Francisco from the East Coast every six weeks, staying at the Hilton, sexually active; his business day started with 6 AM calls back to New York, meetings all day, late dinner with client and client wife, leaves them after 10 PM. What's he going to do? Go out and cruise? He has to be up at 5 AM. He calls us. We go on his expense account.

Jack Fritscher: Can we ask who got what money?

J. Brian: Average kid earned \$300 a week. One stud was regularly clearing nearly \$1500 a week which he put in stocks and bonds. He's now a very wealthy 35-year-old man. Forty percent of the fee went to the house. Sixty percent, the kids kept. They also got to keep any tips or gifts. But on the subject of gifts, if a young man came back with a diamond ring, the next day I myself would call the client and ask if he really meant to be so generous. If he seemed reluctant, I had the boy return the gift. Nothing worse than a client, generously tipsy the night before, deciding in the cold sober light of dawn that he somehow had been "robbed." That's the kind of stuff I kept close tabs on.

Jack Fritscher: So you never really asked lurid details of what went on?

J. Brian: Very little was lurid. I always considered my agenting a business. I never asked anymore than "Did it all go alright?" I only wanted to know if a client was potentially dangerous to my boys. In three years, out of 1800 calls, we only had one certifiable sicko who wanted a callboy to slash him with razor blades. We didn't do razor blades. Some light spanking from time to time,

but no sick stuff. One client liked to shoot Gillette shaving bombs up my kid's ass. When he switched to menthol, I got rid of him.

Jack Fritscher: Where were you located?

J. Brian: San Francisco's Nob Hill across from the Mark Hopkins Hotel. We weren't "elegant," but with that neighborhood and a professional and celebrity clientele, we had to "look good." Celebrities would stop by, discreetly, and thumb through my photo books to pick out the young men they liked. Most famous people handled themselves very well. They *have* to have a service such as my agency. Can you imagine some of the famous names you know out-on-the-town trying to have a private good time?

Jack Fritscher: Discreetly tell us some dirt.

J. Brian: Most celebs were very warm. One TV actor with his own weekly series called me wanting specifically some young stud who would not know who he was not wearing his famous knit watch cap and riding his motorcycle. So I sent him Carl who had been studying in India for two years and knew nothing about American pop culture. Carl was hot and well hung. He came back from the appointment and asked, "Who was that guy?" The actor seemed to want to have Carl guess his identity. "We showered, and he kept asking, 'Who am I?'" A few minutes later, my phone rang. It was the actor. "Hey," he said, "you know that guy you sent up? He was great sex, but he didn't know who I was." I said, "Isn't that what you wanted?" I guess it wasn't. He wanted someone to adore him.

Jack Fritscher: You were right about having to be a good psychologist.

J. Brian: I always tried to match the boys' private personal preferences with their public advertised specialties. The boys, talking with each other at our Thursday night suppers, compared notes, recommending to each other clients whose tastes best matched another boy's talents.

Jack Fritscher: Do you see any of your graduates today?

J. Brian: A lot of my close friends are people I've used. I hate that word *used*. There's nothing wrong with mutual use. I never abused any of them. A lot of my friends are people I've employed.

Jack Fritscher: Any tragedies? Any successes? I mean, with all the runaways in America today, you probably have the best followup

profile of what happens to kids who early on go out on their own working their big cocks, tight holes, and fuckable faces.

J. Brian: Most of the sex was cocksucking, fucking, rimming, snowballing, felching, shrimping [foot sucking]. A whole Barnum and Bailey of sex acts. Lots of kissing and cuddling. Obviously, it felt good to everybody. But to answer your question: yes.

Jack Fritscher: Tragedies?

J. Brian: None directly related to my business. A couple of heroin OD's and a suicide. Terrible. But those boys arrived with problems no one could solve. Hustling didn't cause their problems. I never allowed any drugs. No boy of mine ever went out on a modeling call stoned.

Jack Fritscher: Successes?

J. Brian: Wow! Yes! One owns three men's clothing stores; another a gift shop. One works real estate quite successfully. Another just opened his own computer software shop. One is a recognizable actor on a TV soap opera. Another is now dancing on Broadway in a hit musical. One young stunner has a flourishing landscaping business.

Jack Fritscher: You taught them business sense.

J. Brian: I never sent a boy out unless I had rehearsed him through everything from the proper way to knock on a door to the way to handle himself as a young gentleman for hire.

Jack Fritscher: We're just skimming the top of your experience. You ought to do a book, what with your modeling agency and filmmaking background.

J. Brian: Maybe. I did make an American First. I wrote and shot the first hardcore "talkie" film, *Seven in a Barn*, in 1971. Altogether I made ten films.

Jack Fritscher: They're on videotape now, right? I saw an ad recently: Astronics, 90 Golden Gate Avenue, San Francisco, 94102.

J. Brian: I like you.

Jack Fritscher: Where were you when *Drummer* needed you with your hot-and-cold running boys?

J. Brian: Believe it or not, my business made a lot of men happy.

Jack Fritscher: Very happy.

J. Brian: One of those shrinks from that big convention? Well, he called me from Iowa. He had used my service and liked it. He had a fifty-year-old patient he prescribed be fixed up at my agency. This man was an attractive owner of his own trucking company. Very masculine. Had a wife. Six kids. He flew out from Iowa to San Francisco every weekend for six months. We met him every time at the airport. That's how he came out. He left his wife. He found a lover. He wrote me recently that he's happy now.

