

# THE ONCE AND FUTURE *DRUMMER*

## The Leather Fraternity

When a baroque-back cowboy from the 1970s heard *Drummer* was alive again, he asked what his complete collection of 214 issues was worth. I told him he had a priceless treasure chest of male leather history that shaped who we are today as a global Leather Fraternity. From 1975 to 1999, *Drummer* helped create the leather culture it reported on. *Drummer* promoted leather-bar events, and encouraged men to manifest their leather personalities in regional contests leading up to the annual Mr. Drummer contest at the quiet local Folsom Fair that exploded with international noise when *Drummer* began inviting global subscribers to fly in for the public-sex street orgy. *Drummer* helped thousands of leatherfolk come out. Facing the AIDS emergency, *Drummer* rebranded itself to make safe sex hot by outing new fetish role-playing free of fluids under publisher Tony DeBlase who created the Leather Flag. In 1977, kinky kismet got me hired as founding San Francisco editor-in-chief of this international juggernaut so epic in impact it was bigger than any one of us, including publishers, editors, and contributors like Tom of Finland, Rex, Samuel Steward, Oscar Streaker Robert Opel, and my lover Robert Mapplethorpe.

### HOW WE DID WHAT WE'RE GOING TO DO

*Drummer* was a revolutionary idea in motion. As one of the first three slick magazines after Stonewall, *Drummer* dared portray our desires to organize our thoughts to inform our practices. It was a first draft of leather history. This politically incorrect “men’s adventure magazine” was the leather bible that in the Titanic 1970s, before the iceberg of AIDS, brought the emerging gender

of masculine-identified men out to claim a homomale identity equal alongside other genders. The past, present, and future of *Drummer* embraces all, from cisgender to transgender, who dig diversity within the fetish of leather masculinity—from our straight founding Los Angeles editor Jeanne Barney and 1990s lesbian editor Wickie Stamps to our longtime advice columnist and associate editor, the bisexual-transgender FTM Patrick California. If you praise masculinity, you gotta love people who choose to be men. *Drummer* also included Cynthia Slater, founder of the Society of Janus, and Judy Tallwing McCarthy, the Apache-African-American artist and International Ms. Leather 1987, who wrote about the politics of uniting around gender in our landmark issue, *Drummer* 100, and whose “Gay Birds” S&M cartoons ran in a dozen issues. Our 1970s readership included young leather women who are now leather elders like Vi Johnson, African-American founder of the Carter/Johnson Leather Library, who was interviewed in *Drummer* 173 in 1994.

The way we spun the title *Drummer* out of Henry David Thoreau’s “Walden,” we spun homomale identity out of his friend Walt Whitman’s gender-fluid “Drum-Taps” in “Leaves of Grass.” Like Whitman’s songs of selfhood, homomale identity embodies a cool cognitive dissonance accommodating diverse agencies of masculinity. Homomale identity is less about the act of sex and more about the state of being the Platonic Ideal of a self-reliant man who does the best that men do and not the sexist worst. “Masculinity,” Norman Mailer wrote, “is not something given to you, but something you gain...by winning small battles with honor.” Homomale identity is not separatist. Homomale identity is not hypermasculinity. It is Whitman’s fraternal Calamus Emotion in level conversation with all genders. Masculinity in gay men, nevertheless, seems more vexing to queer culture than femininity in gay men. Playing “daddy” is not a bully sin of patriarchy. At Stonewall in 1969, gay character changed. At the founding of *Drummer* in 1975, leather character changed. In 1976, Los Angeles police chief Ed Davis freaked out over the empowering strength in numbers of masculine leathermen he could no longer dismiss as sissies he could manhandle the way he treated women. Threatened by our first five issues, he hated *Drummer* the way

dictators hate media. On April 10, he attacked us with 65 cops, one helicopter, and one city bus to raid the festive “Drummer Slave Auction” fund-raiser sponsored by the Leather Fraternity. He arrested 42 people including the entire *Drummer* staff. When a cop asked editor Jeanne Barney, the manager of the Leather Fraternity, if she were a drag queen, she snapped, “Honey, if I were a drag queen, I’d have bigger tits.” The LAPD drove *Drummer* from disaster in LA to destiny in San Francisco.

### *DRUMMER* ROOTS: THE LEATHER FRATERNITY

In the name of the Marquis de Sade, *Drummer* validated emerging daddies, boys, bears, and the BDSM alphabet soup of TT, CBT, and FF. *Drummer* prepared the way for you to be OK with the perversatility you enjoy today. *Drummer* was the autobiography of us all, or at least a lot of us, written and drawn and photographed by many of us to entertain the rest of us. Editing monthly *Drummer* daily in real time was a wild existential ride in gay pop culture when readers demanded authenticity and leadership in reporting the coming out of BDSM identity. The cover feature for *Drummer* 7, July 1976, was “*Drummer* Goes to a Leather Wedding.” From 1977-1980, by good fortune in the snake pit of gay publishing, I’d survived editing almost half the issues in existence, and continued as a contributing writer, photographer, and consultant through 1999.

Historically, *Drummer* grew out of four things: 1. Clark Polak’s 1960s magazine, *Drum*, art-directed by Al Shapiro who became my art director at *Drummer*; 2. Larry Townsend’s 1972 *Leatherman’s Handbook* based on his Kinsey-like questionnaire about leathermen; 3. the *H.E.L.P. Newsletter* of the “Homophile Effort for Legal Protection” founded in 1969 to bail out men entrapped by the LAPD; and 4. the drab-gray *Leather Fraternity Newsletter* that needed the enhancing sex appeal of colorful pictures and hot stories to recruit members. Businessman John Embry founded that Leather Fraternity in 1974 as his mail-order scheme to sell cock rings, tit clamps, and poppers not available in Iowa. On June 20, 1975, he slick-wrapped his brochure inside

his first official *Drummer* and trumpeted the Leather Fraternity in bold print on the covers of the first four issues.

#### STATISTICS: *Drummer* LAID END TO END

A stack of 214 issues of *Drummer* is a coffee-table sculpture 3.5 feet tall, weighing 120 pounds. Laid flat, top-to-bottom, *Drummer* stretches 64 yards: two-thirds the length of a football field. At a rough 90 pages per issue, *Drummer* comprised a total 20,000 pages of advocacy journalism created by hundreds of writers, artists, photographers, and designers, including thousands of hot sex-ads written by subscribers. It took a village to fill *Drummer*. With 42,000 copies every issue in the 1970s, and with a pass-along rate of at least a “plus-one reader” in addition to each subscriber, approximately 80,000 people handled each monthly issue of *Drummer* for a 24-year total nearing twenty million people. The annual Folsom Fair hosts 100,000 leather guests. In gay book publishing, 5,000 copies sold is a best seller. *Drummer* helped invent gay publishing by serializing typed manuscripts that could have been books if gay book publishers had existed before the mid-1980s. More eyes have likely read one issue of *Drummer* than have read any best-seller in the gay literary canon, including John Rechy, Edmund White, and Larry Kramer. More inter-active than a book published once, a magazine must skate a Figure-8 on an ice cube to refresh its monthly connection to readers.

#### TOM OF FINLAND: HOMOMASCULINE REPRESENTATION

*Drummer* was a monthly leatherman’s handbook. For 24 years, among millions of leatherfolk in North America and Europe, there was hardly a player who had not heard of or read *Drummer*. Years after the internet killed original-recipe *Drummer*, readers continue to write fan mail to say that as teenagers they had managed to find *Drummer*, even in Bumfuck, Texas, and that the assertive primer that was *Drummer* had mentored their gender and kink identities through erotica that made them think while they were masturbating. The hardest thing to be in America is a man. So there was political empowerment of homomasculine

gender identity in our rebel rag for leatherfolk who like men masculine. So much so that Durk Dehner, president of the Tom of Finland Foundation, declared that “*Drummer*, groundbreaking for its time, set precedence for all homomale representation to come.”

## MASTURBATION IS MAGICAL THINKING

Masturbation is magical thinking. You stroke your wand of manhood, and conjure what you want. Initially, what we did to make *Drummer* pulsate hard was introduce the realism of accessible guys offering new games. We built the spank-bank fantasies of one-handed readers who wanted a virile and virilizing magazine that was a GPS of the new frontier of BDSM. Talk about interactive media! What magic it is to create words and images that make men cum. Erotic writing begins with one stroke of the pen and ends with many strokes of the penis. With its reality-TV contents, *Drummer* was a reader-reflexive magazine showcasing pictures of tough customers you could meet instead of porn modelles paid to fake leathersex.

## NOT OLD OR NEW GUARD, *DRUMMER* WAS AVANT GARDE

The liberal beauty of *Drummer* was its social permissiveness anchored in marching to one’s own drummer. Self-reliance was the key philosophy. *Drummer* was descriptive, not prescriptive, about leather behavior. *Drummer* was non-judgmental in simply reporting how grassroots leather lives were actually lived without commandments. Even though the *Drummer* voice was most often a “Top” seducing subscribers who mostly liked to read S&M stories from a deliciously overpowered “bottom” point of view, *Drummer* was no domineering patriarch demanding, “Thou Shalt” or “Thou Shalt Not.” *Drummer* never prescribed that there was a politically correct way to live leather or be a man because while there may be rules around sex, nobody’s sure what they are.

*Drummer* was never Old Guard or New Guard. *Drummer* was always Avant Garde. That’s why its 20th-century version still holds up as a grand power base sustaining the new 21st-century

version. Because of its passionate readers, *Drummer* survived 24 years of stress from bad management, censorship, plague, and the 1989 earthquake that destroyed our office—to say nothing about that one early plot twist of bad luck becoming good luck when the LAPD busted the infant *Drummer* when it was only ten months old and chased it to freedom in San Francisco. Nevertheless, we survived those dangerous pioneer days after Stonewall. And here we come again! *Drummer* is a living history of leatherfolk written in human blood tattooed on tribal skin.

#### WHO'D A THUNK IT!

hope that baroque-cowboy appreciates his *Drummer* collection. As the new *Drummer* rises, *Drummer* is in the permanent archives of the Kinsey Institute, the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, Cornell University's Human Sexuality Collection, Brown University's John Hay Library, Bowling Green University's Center for Popular Culture Studies, the New York Public Library, the LA County Museum of Art, the ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives at the USC, the Leather Archives & Museum in Chicago, and the Schwules Museum in Berlin.