

CHICAGO INFLUENCE: THE SAN FRANCISCO CONNECTION

Chuck Renslow
1929–2017

Leatherman: The Legend of Chuck Renslow

by Tracy Baim and Owen Keehnen

Leather Archives & Museum, Prairie Avenue Productions,
Chicago, 2011, 414 pages, Illustrated

In the film *Casablanca*, “Sooner or later everybody comes to Rick’s.” In Chicago, the world comes to Chuck’s. Since 1950, Chuck Renslow, now 82, and one of the most famous gay icons on the planet, has safely hosted thousands of GLBT visitors at his thirty gay pop culture venues from his legendary Gold Coast bar (1960-1988), to his International Mr. Leather Contest (1979-ongoing), and to his Leather Archives & Museum (1989).

If there were a Google Street View of sex, millions of gayfolk worldwide could revisit their personal coming-out histories on the map of the Renslow Family enterprises. For sixty years, the blond German-American Renslow, a Chicago native and a politically aggressive Democrat in the Chicago Machine, has been a person of interest to cops, fans, and frenemies.

In transparency, rather than review *Leatherman: The Legend of Chuck Renslow*, I can best, as a SOMA historian, serve as a San Francisco tour guide to this bespoke book which I devoured for its backstage gossip and juicy insider history of leather, lesbians, and Mafia wise-guys shaping gay culture two decades before Stonewall.

Like thousands of impressionable teens, I came out on Renslow’s 1950s Kris Studio photography and then at his 1960s

Gold Coast where, beginning a ten-year union, I married his bartender, David Sparrow. As an eyewitness, I can attest to the authenticity of the comedy, drama, and timeline in *Leatherman* to which I was invited to contribute some memories by leather-village griots Owen Keehnen and Tracy Baim, editor of *Windy City Times*.

Renslow's strategic business mind led gays politically into a new age. He saw first what others only saw eventually. Back when homosexuality was illegal in America, he intuited the private necessity of coming out and the public necessity of having a sanctuary to do it. He first uncloseted the homomale men he favored by giving them social destinations which he eventually diversified to all genders.

By 2010, the winner of his IML contest was Tyler McCormick, an FTM in a wheelchair. He pioneered locally, building a sustainable national model, proving that gay-owned businesses would build the gay community, its politics, and its social network. Born a year before Harvey Milk whose small business, twenty years later, helped anchor the upstart Castro, Renslow evolved an early heartland sexual identity that transformed gay life in Chicago, and went from a regional to a national gay identity that changed city, state, and federal laws.

In 1953, with his lifelong lover and muse, Dom Orejudos, the artist and dancer Etienne, he bought a straight gym, photographed masculine muscle guys who were his bread and butter, created three magazines, disseminated them nationally, was arrested for obscenity by the US Postal Service, and won his case so that male nudes might be sent through the mail.

Without that federal change in the 1960s, the invention and mailing of gay publications in the 1970s could not have happened, and, consequently, *Drummer* would never have become San Francisco's longest running gay magazine (1975-1999).

In a wraparound synergy of business and art, Renslow's deeply established pre-Stonewall Chicago style and the Renslow Family helped create San Francisco's 1970s gay boom.

In Chicago, Etienne, who created the esthetics of Renslow's venues, painted the walls of the Gold Coast, establishing gay bars as galleries, and beginning the "Muralist Movement" that grew

to include Tom of Finland, *Drummer* art director A. Jay, and Folsom Street's Chuck Arnett whom Robert Opel and I in *Drummer* dubbed "Lautrec in Leather."

In 1961, Etienne tutored Arnett who immediately moved to San Francisco and painted his legendary mural on the wall of the new Tool Box bar which in a June 1964 *Life* magazine, five years before Stonewall, was famously published like an engraved invitation summoning gays persecuted nationwide to San Francisco.

Inside the *Bay Area Reporter*, leather columnist Mister Marcus, frequently linking Renslow's entertainments to San Francisco, was also a judge at IML for twenty-some years.

In 1989, Renslow and Anthony DeBlase, the San Francisco publisher of *Drummer*, and creator of the Leather Pride Flag, established the national Leather Archives & Museum.

In 1978, creating Fey-Way, the first art galley in SOMA, Oscar stalker Opel chose veteran artists Etienne and A. Jay to anchor a first exhibit featuring emerging young talent like Robert Mapplethorpe who told me, when assigning him his first magazine cover on *Drummer* 24, how his own 1970s photography was influenced by the 1950s beefcake visions of Renslow who was genius at lighting his models.

In truth, after leaving Chicago and becoming editor of *Drummer*, I injected Renslow's homomascuine, but not separatist, values into the founding of that magazine that helped create the very San Francisco leather culture it reported on.

Patrick Batt, an experienced Renslow business manager, proved you can take the boy out of Chicago, but you can't take Chicago out of the boy: he moved to San Francisco and created the Eagle bar on Folsom Street.

In a great warts-and-all chapter, *Leatherman* describes how the operatic love-hate relationship between thwarted lovers Renslow and pioneer gay author Sam Steward, both of whom were filmed by Alfred Kinsey, caused Steward to move his "Phil's Joynt" tattoo parlor from Chicago to San Francisco in the 1960s where he then mentored Ed Hardy who became San Francisco's premier tattoo artist.

Leatherman will be mined for years by historians and anthropologists analyzing how Renslow lifted others while he himself

climbed. I'm still waiting for Renslow himself to write a personal memoir!