

CYNTHIA SLATER

Kink Queen of Folsom Street Mistress and Myth: A Memoir

In 1974, Cynthia Slater, after a challenging solo startup, partnered with Larry Olsen to found the Society of Janus. In 2017, the San Francisco Leather History Alley set her metal boot print in cement like a star on Hollywood's Walk of Fame. She was a writer, an activist educator, a pansexual "good ol' gal," almost my sister-in-law, and the first woman profiled in *Drummer*. In 1979, she spoke vividly when interviewed for my feature, "S&M The Last Taboo: The Janus Society," which was the first national press coverage of Cynthia and her Janus.

History is *Rashomon*: a story told with multiple points of view. Everyone enjoys private memories of Mistress Cynthia who was a legend before she was history. She ran fast: 7 August 1945 to 26 October 1989. My recall, personal rather than canonical, remembers her as a sex pioneer so earthy she'd laugh a chain-smoker's laugh if labeled saint or visionary. What fun watching her provoke the 1970s San Francisco scene to satisfy her libido reciprocally with local leatherfolk and European sex tourists like Michel Foucault. Her politics came after the sex. She was not a gender separatist. Sex was her business. She broke straight and gay male privilege around kink. Because her paying heterosexual johns were mostly vampire bottoms, she pulled off a r/evolutionary diverse-gender Hat Trick. To grow a pool of mutualist partners, she ran Janus as a mixer to bring out the unaddressed bisexuality of gay men for whom S&M, especially fisting by a lusty woman with small hands, was one more erotic experiment bonding our perversatile community. Sexpert Susie Bright, founding author of *On Our Backs*, told me: "Cynthia was founding Janus in my aunt Molly's gay bar, the Bacchanal, in the East Bay, where the *Women in Print* idea started. Her erotic avatars her entire sex life were gay

men. Although a million dykes were in love with her, she knew her lane. I always hoped she'd find the perfect 'Kinsey 4' man to love her unconditionally."

The two-fisted Cynthia introduced the woke reality of female body, mind, and energy into 1970s leather culture where men's image of leather women was Ann-Margret in *Kitten with a Whip* and Dyanne Thorne in *Ilsa: She-Wolf of the SS*. Cynthia was a kittenish Ilsa, and a highly wired trapeze artist in the 1970s sex circus. Her portrait should have been drawn by the gloriously decadent carnival-midway artist Rex. Cynthia's lover, photographer Honey Lee Cottrell, who became lovers with Susie Bright, documented Cynthia in thousands of female-gaze pictures, including Cynthia nude on a Marin client's horse. *Drummer* photographer Gene Weber, my traveling companion, also shot 35mm transparencies of Cynthia with her Top John Pfeleiderer (and me) for Gene's invitation-only multimedia kink screenings in his art deco apartment atop Buena Vista Avenue West where Cynthia channeled Madame Recamier. Among the horsemen in her stable, the most famous was a very out Earl Baxter, M.D., whose column, "Ask the Doctor," Cynthia featured in her Janus newsletter, *Growing Pains*.

Cynthia idolized the tall and commanding Baxter who was her physician and a master of the feel-good revels in the Catacombs fisting club founded by Cynthia's lover, Steve McEachern, and his lover Michael Shapley, with whom she lived part time. In his doctor's office on the first floor of his white stucco mansion across from the San Francisco Marina Yacht Club, Baxter cured teens of pregnancy, and leatherfolk of clap. He loved Ketamine, fisting, and stallions on weekend S&M runs to the Redwoods. Like all us lucky Folsom Street players in that first post-Stonewall decade, Cynthia was right-place right-time. Like her friend, Larry Townsend, author of *The Leatherman's Handbook*, she helped organize emerging leather identity. She had the humor of Chaucer's bawdy Wife of Bath. Her friend HypnoKink Priestess Kaye Buckley told me: "A gay man called Cynthia a 'sexual witch.' She called herself 'a gay man with a cunt.'" She was the Kink Queen of Folsom Street.

Back when we were all friends together, my publisher and intimate from 1968, the fabulously fallen Roman Catholic leather priest Jim Kane (who was as thin and white as a Communion wafer), and I were part of the variegated gender circle sitting on the floor of Cynthia's tiny apartment for one of her first meetings. The question was: "What's absolutely necessary for you in any S&M scene?" Cynthia shouted: "Pain!" Cynthia was a force of nature whose twisted-sister female energy helped make *Drummer* the 20th-century's BDSM magazine of record. In issue 27, she wrote: "*Drummer*, because of its kinky authenticity, is becoming a solid favorite among kinky straights and kinky gays." I wrote my feature documentation of her body, words, and aura from my intimacy with her as longtime human friends behind the sex scene.

BDSM culture exploded in a speed trip of ten gestational months. August 1974: Cynthia and Larry founded Janus with the first issue of *Growing Pains*. May 1975: Steve founded the Catacombs. June 1975: *Drummer* published its first issue. July 4, 1975: Richard Goldstein wrote his poison-pen essay attacking S&M in the *Village Voice* fueling the feminist sex wars trashing sadomasochism.

Cynthia's Janus Salon, Steve's Catacombs Salon, and the *Drummer* Salon latched onto the nationwide vogue of bisexuality popularized by Studio 54 and the most polyamorous film of the decade, *Cabaret*. More straight women than Liza had a gay leatherman walker on her arm: Jackie Onassis had Jerry Torre escorting her to the Anvil; Patti Smith had Robert Mapplethorpe; leather singer/poet Camille O'Grady who played CBGBs with Lou Reed had Oscar Streaker Robert Opel; and Cynthia had the arm of many a man sleeved on her arm. Her male friends besides Kane, who was her mentor, landlord, and Father Confessor, included modern-primitive performance artist Fakir Musafar; *Urban Aboriginals* author Geoff Mains; whipmeister Peter Fiske, founder of The Fifteen Association; and "Mr. IML 1989" Guy Baldwin—her roommate for three months—who assisted her startup in 1975 and gave the speech introducing Cynthia into the

CLAW Leather Hall of Fame in 2014. Native New Yorker Peter Fiske, a veteran of the 1960s Stonewall bar, but fated to be out of town for its 1969 riot, remembers: “Cynthia made sure gay men were welcome in Janus and gay men made sure she was welcome at the bars and clubs.” In *Drummer* 27, I portrayed Cynthia as a sex missionary who labeled herself a humanist: “Cynthia Slater, an earth-woman in her hot 30s, wearing stiletto-heeled boots and spurs, demonstrates her human bridle. Slater shoves the bit into her Bottom’s mouth, straddles her, and yanks the reins....Catholic leather priest Jim Kane smiles benediction at her wisdom. If he is the priest, she is the priestess.”

San Francisco’s emerging leather salons networked in bars like Hank Diethelm’s Brig, and the Ambush which was Cynthia’s favorite. Those fuck groups creating kink power exchanges were a leather Bloomsbury. In 1978, I introduced my lover Robert Mapplethorpe to Cynthia because I thought the star leather photographer should shoot the star leather woman. Standing in the Catacombs, leathered up in front of Robert’s Hasselblad, “She Who Must Be Obeyed” stood boldly bare-breasted, with an insouciant Eve cigarette, as if posing for a dominatrix ad in the *Berkeley Barb* where in 1973 she had placed her first classified announcing Janus. Leave it to La Slater to create a diva moment. She threw her studied “Biker Chick Look” at Robert to pair with Robert’s *Drummer* cover of Elliot Siegal flaunting his “Hells Angel Biker Look.” That afternoon, Mapplethorpe made her iconic in 16x20 gelatin silver prints now in museums like the Getty. Art scholar Edward DeCelle, whose San Francisco gallery championed Robert’s pictures, declared, “The Slater photographs are mercilessly harsh.” For Robert and Cynthia, that was the radical point. The authentic collision of beauty and terror is why moralists fear Mapplethorpe’s leather photographs.

In 2009, while assisting Gordon Baldwin in his curating the very safe *Mapplethorpe: Portraits* exhibit for the Palm Springs Art Museum, I made certain, for female leather representation, that Cynthia be displayed alongside other legends Robert lensed: Patti Smith, Yoko Ono, Grace Jones, Keith Haring, Tom of Finland, Thom Gunn, Peter Berlin, and Arnold Schwarzenegger.

In 1978, Cynthia was having an affairette with my brother whom she liked because he was a straight Vietnam-era USMC recruiter. Inside their inside-straight, I, who would not have heterosexual coition, often participated, simultaneously, entertaining her inner slave girl. Thinking like a gay man, she liked threesomes, and orgies, because one single partner rarely brought it all. Cynthia was a swinger and sexual immigrant seeking sanctuary like most of us in 1970s San Francisco. She had a party hostess's passion for welcoming displaced persons, sex refugees, and new meat in town. Few knew that after she quit my brother in 1979, she went down to City Hall, with her lover Steve McEachern as best man, to marry handsome Australian immigrant, Frank Sammut, a cleaner at the Catacombs, to get his Green Card so he'd not be deported. Frank gave me their hippie-chic wedding pictures with drag queen bridesmaids. When her groom gave her the choice of a plane trip to meet parents and friends in Sydney or to receive a cash equivalent, Cynthia nixed going Down Under. On 28 August 1981, Steve died in a sling at the Catacombs which quickly closed, nine months before the first headlines about "gay cancer" ended the 1970s Golden Age of Sex on 11 May 1982.

With her anxious sobriety, HIV diagnosis, and telephone hotline work around sex information and AIDS, Cynthia sent out a commanding invitation to her own college Graduation Party, December 22, 1984, 32 Walter Street, San Francisco, insisting: "Please bring food and drink to share. No alcohol or drugs, please!" Photographer Jim Wigler shot her in 1987 for his exhibit *Faces of AIDS*.

On October 22, 2004, Janus celebrated its thirtieth anniversary with "A Special Leather Tribute" dinner, hosted by Angela di Tenebre and Iain Turner, honoring kink pioneers at 942 Mission Street. The program, with a Honey Cottrell photo of Cynthia on the cover, listed a dozen Leather Pioneers as "special guests" invited to speak about Cynthia and the fetish roots of leather: "Guy Baldwin, Dossie Easton, Amber Rae, Jack Fritscher, Fakir Musafar, Cleo Dubois, Sybil Holiday, Mistress Lana, Robert Morgan Lawrence, Mark I. Chester, Josh Shaw, Karen Furr, Carol Truscott, and Chris Schwertfeger, with Carol Queen as emcee." At the head table, Guy Baldwin and I sat reminiscing

about our auld lang syne. Guy, her lifelong friend, was the first gay man seated on her first board of directors. He was particularly moving when he stood to propose his toast. History ends in tears. The crowded room was full of love. In that moment of nostalgia, I recalled the eulogy that transman Patrick Califia, an early coordinator for Janus, read at Cynthia's memorial, as well as the poignant obituary that Carol Truscott wrote for *Sandmutopia Guardian*, issue 8. Cynthia is best remembered institutionally at <http://www.hawkeegn.com/bdsm/janhis.pdf>

When she died at 44 in 1989, Cynthia was renting rooms in the 42 Pearl Street building owned by Jim Kane (1927-2004) who lived next door at 11 Pink Alley with its once busy dungeon pictured in *Drummer* 17. Sorting Cynthia's estate, Susie Bright said, "She really knew her shit, and she saved so many leather souls; you know what I mean?" Her friend David May, author of *A Nice Boy from a Good Family*, told me she even wrote her own obituary. She also wrote short stories like her first-person feminist S&M fiction "Discovery" in *Drummer* 125. At our last goodbye at the corner of Pink and Pearl, she gave me manuscripts of her unpublished short fiction which, in her evolution to kink humanism, contains the beating heart of a free woman who helped brand S&M as Sensuality and Mutuality.