

**Chuck Arnett Introduced  
Psychedelia, Surrealism, and the Needle into the  
Veins of Folsom Street Leather Art and Culture...**

**CHUCK ARNETT**

**Lautrec In Leather**

Robert Opel's CHRISTMAS FIX invitation illustrated with Chuck Arnett's drug-cartoon for the new year's party at Fey-Way Gallery, Midnight, December 30, 1978, featured a surreal Santa Claus shooting up his forearm with a hypodermic needle revealing previous track scars spelling out NOEL.

The wild young Broadway dancer turned leather artist, Chuck Arnett (b. 1928), was the 1960s psychedelic hippie pioneer who created San Francisco's legendary Tool Box bar (1962-1971), glamorized a sensuously louche leather look in gay media, and introduced the needle to 1970s Folsom Street sex.

Insisting that gay art be displayed in gay bars, he stated: "Galleries are funeral parlors for artwork." I met him at the Tool Box in 1970, and hired him as a frequent contributor when I was editor-in-chief of *Drummer* magazine. He drew the cover of *Drummer* #5 after Robert Opel dubbed him our "Lautrec in Leather" in *Drummer* #4 because he so often sat observantly sketching our scene in bars like the Ambush, and the Red Star Saloon which he owned.

Nevertheless, the galleries got him.

In the 1970s-1980s, Andy Warhol bought many of his sexiest paintings and pastels, and in 1989, I profiled him in *Drummer* #134, and in Mark Thompson's significant book "Leatherfolk." In 2008, the GLBT Historical Society of San Francisco cleverly borrowed our 1976 *Drummer* label "Lautrec in Leather" for its retrospective. In 2012, Nayland Blake recreated Arnett's world-famous

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Tool Box mural in his exhibit, “Free!Love!Tool!Box!” at San Francisco’s Yerba Buena Center for the Arts.

Arnett believed in the surrealism of drugs as a reality superior to the dream of daily consciousness, but his reality was pricked by a virus. As an eyewitness new journalist, I long ago intuited that the sharing of needles during the Titanic 70s—perhaps more than unsafe sex itself—was what killed many speed-driven leather players, especially fisters, in the first wave of HIV.

In addition to Fey-Way founder Robert Opel exhibiting Arnett at that 1978/9 new year’s gala, Opel—who had famously streaked the 1974 Academy Awards—also premiered his own film “Fuck You, Santa Claus.” The artists he featured were the divine “Camille O’Grady direct from the Mineshaft in her first West Coast appearance,” Ruby Zebra’s queer rock poetry, Spikey Dummer’s live music, Tom of Finland, Rex, Chuck Arnett, Olaf, the Hun, A. Jay, and photographer Bill Moritz from the LA salon of filmmaker Fred Halsted.

Fourteen years before, in 1964, *Life* magazine, the most popular magazine in mid-century America, featured Chuck Arnett’s invention of the aggressively homomale Tool Box bar in its June 26 feature, “Homosexuality in America.” Five years before Stonewall, that provocative article slid into the mail boxes of nearly every bourgeois home in the U. S. The text and photos were so seductive and hot it was like sending an engraved invitation to every closeted queer in the country to head to the gay sanctuary city of San Francisco to fuck on Folsom and carouse on Castro.

Every revolution has its artists. The shy gentleman Tom of Finland fine-lined idealized dream images of polite romance; the aggressive swinger Chuck Arnett posterized a militant edge to hard-balling sleaze. Arnett, hardly less prolific than the more organized Tom, summoned two-fisted sex warriors to the front lines of gay-body liberation. His political mixed-media action art, literally propagandizing his command “DO IT!,” was the raw style that looked deceptively like graffiti scrawled with anonymous truth on toilet walls.

In 1971, San Francisco developers knocked the Tool Box building down to a pile of bricks. Somehow, though, the wrecker’s ball failed to destroy the huge stone wall with Arnett’s archetypal

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mural of “urban aboriginal” men in leather silhouettes first made famous by “Life.” For two years, at the corner of Fourth and Harrison streets, drivers coming down the off-ramp from the Bay Bridge freeway were greeted by Arnett’s great wall of somber dark shadows, his Lascaux cave drawings of primal, canonical, kick-ass leathermen.

The Tool Box was replaced by a Whole Foods grocery.

After decades of playing master of revels at the Slot Hotel and the Barracks bath on Folsom, the gaunt Chuck Arnett, a lovely man and a human artist, peacefully transcended sixty years of his colorful visionary life at 12:45 p.m, March 2, 1988, nine years after Robert Opel was shot to death, July 7, 1979, in his Fey-Way Gallery.