

Drummer-ing up the Zeitgeist by david stein

As editor in chief and principal feature writer of *Drummer* during the critical early years of 1977-79 (*Drummer* 19-30, plus ghost-editor of *Drummer* 14-18, 31, 32, 33), Jack Fritscher was both chronicler and instigator of what he was the first to call gay America's "Second Coming Out." The first coming out is when a guy discovers that what gets his dick hard and makes it shoot is, well, *dick*. The second coming out is when he moves beyond dick and ass to discover ("total body sensuality," as Jack called it, which leads to a desire "to play and to please itself in true S and M (Sensuality and Mutuality) with other men.")

During the nearly quarter century of *Drummer's* run, the ruthless logic of that desire, colliding with the even more ruthless imperatives of post-industrial capitalism, enabled leathersex to spread for better or worse from the back alleys and waterfront dives of America to its shopping malls, theaters, campuses, living rooms, and Internet chat rooms. Practices that seemed thrillingly *outré* when the magazine began are now considered suitable for jokes on prime-time sitcoms. What was still a cottage industry of individual craftsmen making custom leather-wear and unique "toys" back then has become serious business today, employing thousands of people and generating many millions of dollars in revenues. A community that was virtually invisible to "civilians" before Stonewall has spilled so far out of the closet that we've become the latest target for the religious extremists who seek to shut down our ever-larger events and ever-glitzier meeting places.

The butt end of the 1970s laid the foundations for the leather population/popularity explosion to come, and Jack's *Drummer* was a big part of that pop-culture process. In the ensuing decades after Jack, often recycling Jack, *Drummer's* publishers and editors kept trying to harness and direct the waves of New Leather (both men and ideas) that kept pouring into the scene, with decreasing success, until finally the magazine was left behind by the dot-com generation at the turn of the new century.

LEATHER AS A STATE OF MIND

To write about the new state of sexuality writers had to corral concepts. Before I coined the phrase "Safe, Sane, and Consensual" in the 1980s,

Excerpt source: [Jack Fritscher, *Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer*, San Francisco: Palm Drive Publishing, 2008](#)

Jack had re-defined S&M as “Sensuality and Mutuality” (1972) and had coined the word *homomascularity* (1978). We needed new vocabulary to write about our new attitudes, our new identities, and our new way of expressing sex that till then dared not speak its name. Tom Lehrer sang “When correctly viewed, everything is lewd,” and it was Jack, more than anyone else, who taught us that leather is as much a state of mind as a piece of clothing. Many of the ideas, terms, fantasies, and practices that leathermen and other masculine queers take for granted today (tit play, Daddies, prison sex, raunch scenes, bondage as meditation, cigar sex, gut-punching, rubber sex, sports-gear fetishes, pain as ecstatic release, and much more) can be traced back to Jack’s writing and photographs published in *Drummer* during the years Jack edited it and provided much of the content himself, or else to articles he wrote or suggested after Tony DeBlase brought him back as a frequent contributor starting in *Drummer* 100 (October 1986). Jack didn’t invent any of these practices and fetishes which he debuted, but his bravura writing and inspired editing helped fix them in the minds of two generations of perverts.

Jack understood early on that the brain is the largest and most important sex organ, and he kept telling us so both directly and indirectly. Nearly always writing in the first person, he showed us by example that the best way to enjoy an unfamiliar or off-putting scene is to dive in head first, imagination wide open, and judgments locked down. Get a man’s head in the right place, and his dick and balls will follow.

Much of Jack’s writing, both fiction and nonfiction, turns on the courage it takes for a man to accept his need and desire (occasional for some of us, practically constitutional for others) to bottom out, to go down, to just give in and accept what ever another man chooses to throw at him. Jack likes to write about tough, strong, masculine men who know what they want and are ready to take it (in either sense of taking it). His bottoms aren’t wimps or wusses but every bit as tough as his tops, which certainly makes switching roles a lot more practical!

THE RISE OF THE BUTCH BOTTOM

The mainstreaming of leathersex could not have happened without Jack’s masculinization of the bottom side of homosexuality. One of the reasons leathersex was able to fly under the radar for so long was that the public image of the gay male was so tightly (and wrongly) linked with effeminacy. Butch guys could get away with anything because they could always “pass.” But in the 1970s it all changed; the “butch bottom” arose and increasingly demanded the respect that had hitherto been accorded exclusively to tops and straights.

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Up-and-coming American fags-in-training of my generation learned the great lesson that even if we started out as sissies, we didn't have to stay sissies just because we liked cock. We might push paper or curl hair at work, but afterward we could go to the gym and lift weights till we had the kind of bodies we'd always envied. Or we could at least dress like it. A more masculine style became the norm throughout the gay subculture.

Drummer both reflected and promoted this development, and no one—except maybe Tom of Finland—did more to cement it in gay-male consciousness than Jack Fritscher. His play, *Corporal in Charge of Taking Care of Captain O'Malley*, which first appeared in *Drummer* 22 and *Drummer* 23 (May and July 1978), hit us with an unforgettable one-two punch to the groin and the psyche. In place of the classic polarity of butch and femme, or he-man and punk/twink (still visible in early *Drummer* itself in such role models as Fred Halsted and Joey Yale), *Corporal in Charge* gave us butch and super-but.

Not even being called a “cunt” (a label the character rejects) can shake the Marine Corporal's sense of himself as a *man* in love with serving and servicing another man like himself—superior precisely because he has *more* of the same qualities present in the man on the bottom.

In the coming decades, *more of the same* would become the new paradigm for homomale sexuality.

REFLECTIONS IN MIRRORED SHADES

Jack knew what he was doing. It was no accident, or joke, that he added the tag, “American Review of Gay Popular Culture” above the masthead in *Drummer* 23. His aim was to reflect changes in gay culture even as they were occurring, by reflecting the lives of *Drummer*'s readers back to them, creating a feedback loop that would reinforce the already existing trends toward a more masculine style and a more experimental, all-embracing sensuality. His much-imitated creation of “Tough Customers” (*Drummer* 25, December 1978), in which the readers themselves became the porn stars, is only one of the devices he employed to this end.

Jack's landmark features reporting on such establishments as the Mineshaft (*Drummer* 19), the Catacombs (*Drummer* 23), the Quarters (*Drummer* 24), and the Academy Training Center (*Drummer* 145) can be viewed in the same light. His super-heated prose and photos fueled their legends, yes, but at the same time he demystified them, making them seem less distant and inaccessible. He actively challenged readers (especially in the Training Center piece) to do what he did, master their fears and fulfill their fantasies by checking the facilities out in person. Jack had no truck with the conventional porn-mag “Look, but don't touch”

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attitude. Instead, his siren call was, “See what can be yours, if you have the balls to reach out and grab it.”

But along with reports on such unquestionably “popular” phenomena as jock sports (*Drummer* 19), punk rock (*Drummer* 21), and rodeo (*Drummer* 26), Jack didn’t hesitate to make detours into the precincts of “high culture.” No, he didn’t review opera, but he did write one of the smartest pieces ever on Pasolini’s difficult film, *Salo* (*Drummer* 20); he urged readers to take Pasolini’s cautionary politics as seriously as his art. And if Jack’s greatest discovery, Robert Mapplethorpe, eventually became one of the most widely known (if least understood) artists in the world, other enthusiasms of his, like the filmmaker Derek Jarman (review of *Sebastiane*) and the photographer Arthur Tress (four poems accompanying a gallery feature in *Drummer* 30), remain relatively esoteric delights to this day. But Jack wrote about them—and Mapplethorpe and the artist Rex (both in his “New York art” issue, *Son of Drummer*, 1978)—without a trace of condescension, as if every *Drummer* reader would just naturally care as much about their work as he did.

PRACTICAL ALCHEMY

Bondage, a theme close to my own heart, is something Jack returned to several times in *Drummer* and elsewhere (particularly his own later zine, *Man2Man*). He wrote about this fetish or practice more perceptively than anyone before or, probably, since. “Bondage: Blest Be the Tie That Binds” (*Drummer* 24, September 1978, the Mapplethorpe cover issue) is an interview with a New York City bondage master. Like many of Jack’s best pieces, it’s illustrated mainly with photos he himself shot for the article (using the name of his then longtime lover, David Sparrow, who co-owned the camera given to him as a birthday gift by Jack). His other illustrations are several of his appropriate “found” images, like a San Francisco Ballet photo of a male dancer suspended from ropes tied to his limbs and flying in a body harness. Whether this is, as Jack claims, the first feature to analyze bondage in the gay press or not, it was the first to come to my attention that not only turned me on but made me *think* about why.

So much of Jack’s bondage article is quotable, better not to start; and anyhow you have the whole thing in this book. Whether the ideas sprang from Jack (with his years-long background in the spiritual disciplines of the Catholic priesthood), or from his interview subject, or emerged in the interplay between them, here is the *ur*-text for the now commonplace notion that rigid, immobile bondage is a form of meditation, a way of stilling the mind, and thus releasing it, and thereby the body as well, from

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everyday cares and tensions. You'll also find the idea, not surprising given Jack's overall catechism of leather, that bondage promotes whole-body sensuality instead of genital-centered sexuality. Then there are the ideas that you entrust yourself to the bondage master's care, giving yourself to him, and he gives you back to yourself, unharmed but not unchanged, at the end. And that he takes you on a trip and returns you safely again. It's all there, explicitly or implicitly.

Another, rather curious theme pops out if you quickly scan through Jack's *Drummer* bibliography; the man had a recurrent case of the blues. There's "Prison Blues" (*Drummer* 21), "Cigar Blues" (*Drummer* 22), "Castro Street Blues" (*Drummer* 24), "Tit Torture Blues" (*Drummer* 30), "Foreskin Prison Blues" (*Drummer* 186), and his wonderful short novel *I am Curious (Leather)* aka *Leather Blues*. Maybe it was just a catchy tag word; or maybe he was riffing like a jazz stylist on a theme trying to signal something about how to read them? Maybe he meant us to infer that in these pieces, especially, he was *testifying*, telling us truths that might be painful to hear? Or, as a reporter, enabling others to testify *through* him? But *Drummer's* about S&M, right? Pain is pleasure, right? So it's all really about pleasure, right? Yeah, right; *not*.

As a masochist of long standing myself, allow me to testify that the pain is *real*, and the greatest endorphin rush in the world doesn't make it any less real. It just helps you accept it, embrace it, and transmute it into an equally real pleasure. Jack discovered sadomasochists are practical alchemists, and he figured if we can transmute raw pain into ecstasy, then by God, we can pretty much transmute anything into anything we want. Whatever fetish he chose to write about, in the end it came down to some form of alchemy, just as he wrote about leather magic and leather ritual in his book, *Popular Witchcraft*, written at the same time as *Leather Blues* (during 1968-1972) and published at the same time as Larry Townsend's *The Leatherman's Handbook*. How boring it would be if a cigar had to stay *just* a cigar!

THE AUTHENTICITY FETISH

Like most fetishists, however, Jack is obsessed with "authenticity." And like a great many highly introspective intellectuals, including Henry David Thoreau who is quoted on nearly every masthead of *Drummer*, he tends to locate human authenticity in the *unreflective*, the "natural man" untainted by societal repression and superficiality. (See especially his "authenticity" editorial, "Getting Off," in *Drummer* 24.) That may explain his fascination not only with such iconic figures as athletes, cowboys, cops, and soldiers, but also with such less bourgeois characters as

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convicts, hustlers, outlaw bikers, and rednecks. Throw in his reportage of his readers' desires (not necessarily his) for every sort of sweaty raunch, from headcheese to snot, not excluding piss, spit, and a below-stairs whiff of forbidden scat, and it would seem *Drummer* gave its readers what at the time they wanted, what the French call *nostalgia pour la boue*, or *nostalgia for the mud*. That phrase can refer either to the dirt of a peasant village or the mud-choked gutters of an urban slum, depending on which one you, or your ancestors, crawled out of to reach a state of gentility or bourgeois comfort that may define liberated gay culture.

Jack re-incarnated this "nostalgia against the bourgeois" by making a fetish of blue-collar men as a class, their masculine way of being, their clothing and their pursuits. He glamorized "Tough Customers." Within a forty-year spread in gay history (1930s-1970s), Jack uses this *nostalgia pour la boue* in the same literary way that Christopher Isherwood colorizes his own personal slumming with Sally Bowles and Otto Nowak in *The Berlin Stories*. Both insert the outsider authors and their middle-class readers into proletarian life in a way most vividly illustrated in *Drummer* by Jack's other discovery, Old Reliable, who thrilled *Drummer* readers with his extremely authentic *boue* photographs of young, dangerous, gay-for-play ex-cons, street hustlers, boxers, and AWOL military who live outside gay culture, and stretch the parameter of my axiom, "Safe, Sane, and Consensual." Jack also commissioned, cast, and designed the anti-piss-elegant Robert Mapplethorpe photograph *de la boue* "Authentic Biker for Hire" for *Drummer* 24, the same issue that showcased Old Reliable's photography in the interview, "In Hot Blood: Ex-Cons - We Abuse Fags."

Is such nostalgia a bad thing? Not necessarily, and perhaps only when it's in bad faith (indulged in, say, while being hypocritically denied, like a homophobic Republican politician arrested for sucking cock in a bus station toilet), or taken to a self-destructive excess. In Jack's case, it seems clear that his literary nostalgia for the mud is, in some ways, a response to the self-ghettoizing tendencies of an all too "self-conscious" American urban faggoty. Countering that gay skintight narcissism, he's nostalgic—romantic even, as the critic Michael Bronski says—for our collective memory of the "ideal world of male otherness" outside the gay ghetto, a blue-collar Eden of rodeo and motorcycles and soldiery he conjures repeatedly in his *Drummer* fiction and novels, where men can be physically intimate with other men without labeling what they're doing, a world of "best buds," "partners," and "teammates" who "stand by" each other without question.

"Good as Gay Lib is," Jack wrote in his provocative editorial in the *nostalgia pour la boue* issue of *Drummer* 24, "the total gay lifestyle as it has been commercialized means that gay men basically screw around only

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with other gay men. Gone are the pre-Lib days when a gay guy adventured out to find a straight male to ball with.” Of course, by now that world is pretty much gone forever; it’s hard to imagine a het man anywhere in America today who *wouldn’t* be self-conscious about gestures and come-ons that might be thought queer. But at the same time, today’s young queers are even less patient with the limitations of the gay ghetto than Jack was back in the 1970s. So when uptight leatherfolk of a certain age feel affronted by the anything-goes attitudes of “post-gay” queer twenty-somethings, guess which ones are following in Jack’s bootsteps?

POLYMORPHOUS PERVERSITY

Although Jack is only a few years my senior, he clearly got started with this sex stuff a lot sooner, and no doubt had fewer inhibitions to begin with. Reading Jack’s *Drummer* articles, essays, stories, and poems as they appeared, and seeing the photos accompanying them, opened my eyes (and many others!) not only to what was being done in the burgeoning gay leather scene, but also to how much more *could* be done if we had the courage and imagination. Reacquainting myself with the pieces collected in this book was a treat, because so much in them is still as fresh, smart, sexy, and insightful today as when they were first published. If they’re new to you, be prepared for a wild ride. But relax—you’re in good hands.

david stein is the much-published author of *Carried Away: An S&M Romance*, a novel enthusiastically reviewed by Laura Antoniou, Patrick Califia, and Joseph W. Bean in 2002. His writing has appeared in such magazines as *Drummer*, *International Leatherman*, and *Bound and Gagged* as well as in anthologies such as Mark Thompson’s *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice* (1991), and Joseph W. Bean’s *Horsemen: Leathersex Short Fiction* (1997). In 1980, he was cofounder of Gay Male S&M Activists (GMSMA) and was founding editor of its historic newsletter in which he published Jack Fritscher’s essay, “Toward a Masculinist M/O: Why Bondage?” from *Man2Man Quarterly* #7 (1981). He is author of the ongoing online *History of Our Leather-S/M Fetish Sub-Culture and Communities*, and is a frequent columnist for the group, Masters and Slaves Together (MasT). As an acclaimed practitioner, he coined the S&M keyword mantra, “Safe, Sane, Consensual,” and has famously appeared in quintessential bondage photographs from Inferno. He lives in Manhattan.

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