

Night Flight 1977

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- I. Author's Eyewitness Historical-Context Introduction written April 17, 2002
- II. The feature essay as published in *Drummer* 20, January 1978
- III. Eyewitness Illustrations

I. Author's Eyewitness Historical-Context Introduction written April 17, 2002

How the Happening Movement Became the Circuit Party

Before there was the White Party and the Black Party and the gay circuit parties, there was *Night Flight*. Into my feature essay in *Drummer* 20, I slipped the subliminal of the bittersweet sense of both *carpe diem* and *sic transit gloria mundi* that permeated life in the Titanic 70s when everything was so good we knew it couldn't last.

Drummer was always late going to press, and was always behind in the number of issues. *Drummer* was the monthly magazine that was never monthly. When *Drummer* died after twenty-four years, there should have been around 300 issues and there were barely 200 issues. Basically, one-third of *Drummer's* monthly "energy and schedule" was eaten by the very grinding up of the talent and money and production that is part of the creative process. If only we all could have worked harder, faster, with adequate budgets and salaries paid on time by cheapskate *Drummer* publishers, and with less censorship from right-wing printers, and with no gay politics!

I tried to make each monthly issue of *Drummer* respond to gay pop culture as topically as a weekly newspaper.

I loved the pop-culture mixed-media concept of *Night Flight*. I saw it as part of what in the 1950s Claes Oldenburg, Jack Kerouac, and longtime lovers John Cage and Merce Cunningham named the "Happening Movement" wherein anti-narrative theatrics and nonconformist performances were staged in unexpected locations and required audience participation. In terms of my editing and writing the contents of *Drummer*, I saw the

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Happening Movement as the art structure that gave permission to the colorful hippie be-ins and love-ins in the political 1960s, and that inspired the radical sex rituals and spontaneous creativity of nonconformist—and newly uncloseted—gay leather culture in the baths, bars, and playrooms of the sexually liberated 1970s.

I tripped out on reporting on *Night Flight*, and holding space in the next issue for it—in fact, holding the entire January 1978 issue open at the printers to add the still-hot December 31 party. I wanted *Drummer* to pop, to happen, to be “what’s happening.”

As a photographer, I had staged performance-art happenings on Midwest college campuses and in museums during the turbulent 1960s and 70s, and as faculty advisor for Women’s Awareness Week at Western Michigan University.

In San Francisco in the early 1970s, at the request of my dear friend, the poet Ron Johnson (author of *To Do as Adam Did*, who with his partner, photographer Mario Pirami, invented and managed the No Name bar), I created three or four happenings over two-years’ time at the No Name. With four or five projectors shining intersecting cones of light beamed over the heads of the crowd, my slides and Super-8 movies unspooled with the help of my lover, David Sparrow, as beefy men in uniform carried in naked bodybuilders in cages and set them on the bar, while the crowd—led by our wild Rainbow Motorcycle Club—joined in, smoking grass, drinking beer, tripping on acid, groping, sucking, picking guys up and passing them over everyone’s head to throw them into the long trough of urinal.

In 1992, Ron Johnson (1935-1998) wrote a letter to galvanize the RMC who had prolonged the 1970s happenings in the legendary No Name bar at 1347 Folsom Street, between 8th and 9th:

Dudes—

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the club, and it’s high time to throw a bash. Our Christmas party was so fine we’ve got to really rise (or stoop) to the occasion—no?...One of the things that made the Xmas party such a great success was Lurch as Santa on a beer-shell throne, greeting one and all, and we need again to come up with something so extraordinarily sleazy and daring they’ll all talk about it after. Not many now remember the first anniversary RMC party [1973] where Jack Fritscher was the Entertainment Committee. He brought in three stand-up cages with live, sexy slaves inside. Spotlights! Crowd focus! Promiscuous flagellation! Frenzy! Plus, with his live-action cast,

three slide projectors and two Super-8 projectors of his transparencies and leather films....Where can we go from there?...At the Lone Star [bar], of course...

— Ron Johnson

It was because of my experience with erotic bar happenings in SoMa that *Drummer* publisher John Embry asked me as editor in chief to start up and manage the first Mr. *Drummer* contest in 1979; but I refused, because editing and writing the magazine was task enough.

By the time New Yorkers such as *Night Flight* producer Wakefield Poole arrived in the orgy that was late 1970s San Francisco, I (who called 1960s Manhattan my second home) was very pleased to write about their new infusion of art-sex energy. This article introduced the new East Coast players to the City, and, as a calling card, introduced *Drummer* to them.

They were the best kind of Manhattanization as New York met San Francisco which had reservations about being “Manhattanized.”

That was one of the great pleasures of being *Drummer* editor in chief. It was like the line in *Casablanca*. “Sooner or later everyone comes to Rick’s.” Almost immediately, after I became editor in chief of *Drummer* (March 1977), the ultimate New Yorker, Robert Mapplethorpe, showed up in my office for Halloween, and came back for *Night Flight* on New Year’s Eve 1977. If my early issues of *Drummer* had not been well received in New York, Robert and I might never have met. He wanted *Drummer*; he needed *Drummer*; and I gave him his first magazine cover on *Drummer* 24 (September 1978).

See Victor Bockris’ *Beat Punks* for his interview “Mapplethorpe Takes Off” recorded October 16, 1977, as Robert taxied to JFK to make pilgrimage to California where he scheduled himself to meet the editor of *Drummer*. See also my subsequent formal introduction of Mr. Mapplethorpe to the leather world in “The Robert Mapplethorpe Gallery” in my special New York art issue, *Son of Drummer* (September 1978), featuring three A-List New Yorkers: Mapplethorpe, the pointillist artist Rex, and photographer Lou Thomas of Target Studio. The issue also included Tom of Finland.

Night Flight producers and artists Steve Barnett, Ed Parente, and Paul Hatlestad, the partner of Wakefield Poole, became my good friends, and we worked together with New Yorker Michael Maletta’s Creative Power Foundation on the next party, *Stars*, held on a pier under the Bay Bridge.

Night Flight was pure Warhol via Poole, and very much based in Andy’s historic *Exploding Plastic Inevitable* tour and happening with Lou Reed, Gerard Malanga, Nico, and the Velvet Underground. For the

subsequent art-sex party, *Stars* (1978), I was quite happy to have my photographic transparencies and Super-8 films projected over the heads of thousands of revelers onto white panels from Christo's famous "Running Fence" (1976) that so recently had famously been stretched for twenty-five miles over the coastal hills of Marin County north of the Golden Gate Bridge. No one then had a clue that the white fabric panels on which I projected our gay faces were a ghostly foreshadowing of the panels of the AIDS quilt.

The photographs for my *Night Flight* article were shot by frequent *Drummer* photographer Efrén Ramirez.

The Titanic 70s was an art explosion in gay culture, and the salon around *Drummer* was epicentric to it.

To this day I own and love several Ed Parente sculptures. One is a bouquet of eighteen male fingertips with a single yellow butterfly specimen perched on the tallest finger. The other is a mask of a woman's face wrapped in white silk and creamy lace which Ed found blowing down Castro Street; I have always called the sculpture "The Dead Bride." Both are encased in Parente's signature Plexiglas boxes. In the same way, I treasure even more the large photographs that my bicoastal lover Robert Mapplethorpe signed to me.

As gay art galleries opened up, so did gay businesses. Paul Hatlesrad, during the 1970s when we all wore gold chains around our necks, was nearly electrocuted when he was wiring his and Wakefield Poole's new boutique on Market Street at Castro. Because the chain was a ring, the electricity traveled around and around his neck without killing him, although his neck was permanently scarred 360 degrees every one of the twenty-five times the power surged around his neck.

It was a coincidence that the name of what became their very successful boutique was "Hot Flash" whose symbol was a lightning bolt.

II. The feature essay as published in *Drummer* 20, January 1978

The First Manhattan-izing Party in San Francisco...

Night Flight 1977

The Night Everybody Was a Star & the Virgins Jumped into the Volcano

SAN FRANCISCO. DECEMBER 31, 1977. *NIGHT FLIGHT* was a golden New Year's Eve night in the Golden Age of San Francisco—and

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[Drummer, San Francisco: Palm Drive Publishing, 2008](#)

a shock to the old over-easy attitude of Sodom-by-the-Bay. Manhattan energy streaked into town, rented the entire three floors of the Gay Community Center, and designed out of its pits a night when everybody was a star.

NIGHT BEFORE 1978's EVE

The Boarding Pass ticket to *Night Flight* read 10 PM to 7 AM. By 2 AM, time-frame turned into time-warp. Barnum and Bailey with all the Ringlings of the Niebelungen could eat their hearts out. The Center is a Bette-Davis dump, but not after *Night Flight* worked the joint over like a [Phyllis] Diller redone at Arden's. The entire interior of the Center was wrapped with white billowing sections of the Christo Fence that had run through Marin County and then into the sea. Now Christo's fabric hung wall to wall, from the first-floor coat check to the third-floor movie dens. Three thousand men floated together inside a white parachute around circular silver ice-pools chock-full of beer, Calistoga, and The Real Thing.

CASINO ROYALE: STRIP-WRESTLING

The upper-floor Casino operated games of chance placed around the walls of the room. In the center of the Casino stood a boxing-ring-size platform. All night long, professional acts of juggling, magic, and strip-wrestling featured "The Amazing Kristavo"; "On-Off, The Wonder Robot"; and a healthy "Rick & Ron." Casino prizes came from 50 sponsors: health clubs, restaurants, bookstores, florists, gloryholes, galleries, baths, "Jaded Degenerate Man" T-shirts, photographers, artists, and manicurists for men who *need* smooth nails.

Behind the Casino on the right, where The Who was on first, "The Tommy Memorial Pinball Room" ran two lines of twenty machines with Levi's baskets pressed tight against the front of the flashing, flipping, score-chunking pinballs. Behind the Casino on the left, all night long, a single red light hung over a large brick room where the non-professional acts of juggling, magic, and strip-wrestling writhed the night away.

DISCOMANIACS: THE FORBIDDEN CITY OF OZ

Hovering over the dance floor, the light-and-sound saucer-booth flashed in time to the high-energy music. A thousand dancers filled the floor. Aroma of popper rose over their heads where a tight-rope walker balanced his way from crowded balcony to crowded balcony. Bodies heated. Shirts

peeled off. Light show designs changed electronically. Special Duty Police stood straight and politely slack-jawed at every exit.

Grown men reported UFO sightings of a tower of sparklers and billowing smoke rolling through the sweaty crowd. From inside the tower, hands threw orange Popsicles out into the tangle of naked arms. Men moved, flowed, from amusement to amusement, wandering inside the wonderful white parachute.

Night Flight was a full Busby Berserkly production number. *Night Flight* was not just four walls and a crowd. *Night Flight* was premeditated design. Every detail was calculated to entertain the most jaded audience in the world. And its magic worked, because *Night Flight* was for one night only. Nothing about it was ordinary. Nothing about it did you see last week or could you get around to next week. *Night Flight* was the *Now* of that one night: a celebration of living life-in-the-fast-lane of The Forbidden City of Oz.

IMAGES: A ROMAN ORGY

As a ton of California grapes cascaded down the balcony walls, a second 20-foot high scaffold rolled to the middle of the dance floor. The crowd parted in an acid-red sea of sweat. Atop the scaffold, a man rode to the center of the crowd. He commanded six projectors like the multiple eyes of some closely encountered great iron beast. He shot surreal images of faces from its six eyes to six screens hung around the hall. Men dancing in front of the screens in white screen-like capes, became part of the abstraction.

In other rooms, floral displays toppled with bodies into the icepools.

TOWARD 1980: A SNEAK PREVIEW

For San Francisco, where failure of imagination often looks suspiciously like an energy outage, *Night Flight* was a Manhattanization much to be desired. Michael Maletta's production proved a New Wave is hitting San Francisco, because in among the dancing, sucking, fucking, fisting, and variously heavy free-for-all S&M numbers, a lot of San Francisco heads got blown away and lost their cherries at *Night Flight*. How ya gonna keep 'em down in imagination after they've experienced a night like *Night Flight*?

Laidback and waiting like Madame Recamier has finally passed as San Francisco's favorite posture. "Laidback" won't cut it anymore. The bitch-and-bull mating of New York energy with San Francisco attitude is already producing results. Four days after *Night Flight*, two "rogue" San

Francisco cops decided to raid a gay bath: a private place for consenting adults. Within hours, they were the laughing stock of the straight media and were censured by their chief. Public statements strong as *Night Flight*'s very existence strengthen the solidarity of the gay political front. The gay network is like Peter Finch's New York *Network*: "When you're mad as hell, you won't take interruptions of your lifestyle anymore."

Night Flight proceeds went to the Pride Foundation which fights for gay rights in the courts, in the military, in the bedroom, and in the playroom.

VIRGINS

After *Night Flight*, there are no virgins anymore. That one *Night Flight* night they all jumped into the volcano. Willingly. And the good times rolled.

Night Flight: produced by Michael Maletta; conceptual design, Robert Currie; music, Vincent Corleo; lighting, Roy Shapiro; visuals, David Meyer; spacecraft, Alan Greenspan; lighting and sound equipment, William Roderick Associates and Sound Genesis; poster design, Joseph Vincent; poster illustration, Ed Parente; slide show, Steve Barnett and Paul Hatlestad [and Wakefield Poole].

III. Eyewitness Illustrations

"Night Flight." New Year's Eve, December 31, 1977. Where Circuit Parties began. A "Tightrope Walker" crosses above the heads of the dancing crowd in the Gay Community Center, San Francisco. "Night Flight" publicity kit. Photograph by Efren Ramirez. ©Efren Ramirez

Top left and clockwise: Dancers at “Night Flight,” December 31, 1977. Top right: Dancer on right is sniffing poppers. “Night Flight” publicity kit. Photographs by Efen Ramirez. ©Efen Ramirez. In the “Night Flight” article in *Drummer*, editor in chief Fritscher was the first to print the phrase “the Golden Age of San Francisco.” Center: Envelope of invitation to “Stars,” the party sequel to “Night Flight,” May 27, 1978. Bottom: Front and back of the photo-ID Boarding Card created for each guest at “Stars.”

© Jack Fritscher

Top: Promotion kit for the “Stars” party published in *Drummer*. Bottom: Invitation card to “Stars” featuring Fritscher quote from *Drummer*.

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Top left-clockwise: “Steve Barnett,” producer of “Night Flight,” Fritscher-Henry House, 1982. Photograph by Jack Fritscher. ©Jack Fritscher. “The Wizard’s Emerald City” and “Hot Flash” were two upscale gay businesses that widened the Castro neighborhood out to Market Street. “Stare Cases” copy and “Emerald City” advertising written in 1976 within the *Drummer* salon by editor in chief Jack Fritscher for Richard Trask, star of the film *Erotic Hands*.

Opposite page. Top left-clockwise: “Quiver.” Drawing by Edward Parente. “Ed Parente,” Fritscher-Henry House, 1982. Photograph by and ©Jack Fritscher. “Invitation, Parente Sculpture Exhibit.” Parente sculpture “Fingertips with Butterfly in Plexiglas Box,” 1981, from the collection of Jack Fritscher. Photograph by and ©Jack Fritscher. Wakefield Poole’s “*New York Times* Display Ad” for his film *Boys in the Sand* (1971) was a gay history first in the *NYT*, illustrated by Ed Parente. Andy Warhol famously said in the *NYT* (1972): “After Wakefield Poole’s movies, mine are unnecessary and a little naive, don’t you think?”

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“StarMakers,” 1975 brochure, custom filmmaking in San Francisco by David Sparrow and Jack Fritscher, domestic lovers and business partners (1969-1979), dba Spitting Image. “Faces, Physiques, Leather to Glitter....‘Personally, I prefer StarMakers. —Dorian Grey”
©Jack Fritscher

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“Previews” publicity kit. Popular culture critic Fritscher observed: “Everything in the Titanic 1970s roared up finally like the cacophonous, partially-improvised orchestral crescendo of the 24-bar extended E-major chord at the end of the Beatles’ ‘A Day in the Life’ in the *Sgt. Pepper* album.” Upping the production values of “Night Flight,” the rush of high-octane parties like “Previews” starring Sylvester included a “Vinyl Record” in the “Invitation” to the concert-dance on October 9, 1982, even as Gay-Related Immune Deficiency (GRID) illnesses began to tarnish the Golden Age with whispers of HIV and AIDS. In December 1988, Sylvester (of the Hula Palace salon) died at 42, the same age at which Mapplethorpe (of the *Drummer* salon) died March 1989.



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**Eyewitness
Illustration**

“*Drummer* Trucker Party” ad in *Drummer*. Catching the cash-cow wave of the CMC Carnival, “Night Flight,” and “Stars,” *Drummer* hosted its own homomasculine theme party, “Truckers,” at Trocadero Transfer, 520 Fourth Street, San Francisco, November 7, 1980. This extravaganza led to the parties of the Mr. *Drummer* annual contest.

