

Some Dance to Remember: **How the Boys in the Band Played On**

by Mark Hemry

People don't usually move to San Francisco to write novels, but when novelist Jack Fritscher got off the train in 1961, he knew instantly that San Francisco was a story telling itself.

In the way Christopher Isherwood was a camera in 1930s Berlin documenting gay culture collapsing from viral politics, Fritscher was a camera during the Titanic 1970s in San Francisco. The journals he wrote were the footage he shot while "the first-class party was cruising on, full speed, innocent of the icebergs of HIV, steroids, and political correctness that lay ahead."

"At Stonewall," Fritscher wrote, "gay character changed. Everywhere, including San Francisco."

As an eyewitness participant, Fritscher took notes. As editor in chief of the legendary *Drummer*, San Francisco's longest-lived gay magazine, he turned those personal "oral history" notes into authentic stories reflecting the way we were during the wonderful window of sexual freedom between penicillin and HIV.

Citing Fritscher's distinguished work collecting a vast archive of gay history from which he fact-checked *Some Dance* in the last analog age before laptops and the Internet, Willie Walker, co-founder of the GLBT Historical Society San Francisco, honored him as "...the pioneer writer who since the 1960s has documented the gay world and the changes it has undergone."

The Advocate praised *Some Dance* as "epic, comic, mythic, the Castro's gay *Gone with the Wind*." The *Lambda Book Report* honored *Some Dance* on its finalist list of the five best novels of 1990. The ForeWord Awards named *Some Dance* the Best GLBT Book of the Year.

"I didn't write *Some Dance*. The book wrote itself," Fritscher said. "Back in the day, I'd watch the local color of what went on in the streets, bars, cafes, baths, and discos, and go home and write it down. It's a picaresque comedy, a character-driven satire of a rather needy yet roguish protagonist surrounded by sex adventurers."

“And, no, I am not the narrator ‘Magnus Bishop’ anymore than I am the idealist knight-errant ‘Ryan O’Hara’ who, questing to find a ‘lord’ to give service to, suffers like a pre-feminist Judy Garland because of ‘The Man That Got Away.’ And I am not the muscle-bear ‘Kick Sorensen,’ or the porn mogul ‘Solly Blue,’ or the post-traumatic Vietnam vet ‘Thom,’ or the fab cabaret singer ‘Kweenasheba.’

“If *Some Dance* is autobiography,” he said, “it is an autobiography of the Castro and Folsom neighborhoods told in a 180-degree view different from the usual ‘coming out’ and ‘drag’ genres. It’s an autobiography of a certain group of people in a specific place during a singular time caught in the epic collision of three changing philosophies of homosexuality represented by pre-Stonewall civilization, 1970s gay liberation, and 1980s political correctness and HIV.”

In many ways, *Some Dance* is a more serious companion book to Armistead Maupin’s classic *Tales of the City*. Both capture the heady times during which they were written, but the men in *Some Dance* are assertive and realistic in sorting out and defending their own gender identity in the suddenly liberated 1970s when all emerging gays were figuring out what kind of “gay” they were.

As legitimate as any feminist novel insightful about women, *Some Dance* celebrates the idea of the inevitability of uncloseting homosexual masculinity. Fritscher is a humanist who, like Robert Mapplethorpe favoring writers such as Rimbaud and Baudelaire, never shies away from leading the inquisitive reader into both the bright side and dark side of the male psyche. The themes in *Illuminations* and *Les Fleurs du mal* are similar to the themes in *Some Dance*: orgasm and death, sacred and profane love, body metamorphosis through steroids and sex trances, urban anxiety, and Rimbaud’s “long, intimidating, immense, and rational derangement of the senses” through visionary drugs.

Fritscher is an upfront writer who dares document the sexy side of San Francisco in the same way he boldly detailed the forbidden sexy side of his bicoastal lover, Robert Mapplethorpe in his best-selling memoir *Mapplethorpe: Assault with a Deadly Camera*. “Without consideration of Robert’s sex photographs,” he said, “there is no real understanding of his more ‘polite’ work. Without sex, there is no real understanding of gay literature whose core is sexuality.”

With those credentials, the Erotic Authors Association granted him its Lifetime Achievement Award.

From his 1960s novel *Leather Blues* and his 1970s days editing *Drummer*, he has moved the chronicles of gay history forward by persistently

leaning fifteen degrees headfirst into the wind. He has resisted censorious fundamentalist gays who think that a frank representation of motivational psychology driven by sex and drugs is besides the point in storytelling.

“Psycho-sexual explication and even exploitation,” he said, “is necessary so that a tale is not half-told. In my writing, sex begins in the head and works its way down.”

Applauding the psychology within *Some Dance*, Alan L. Storm, writing in the the *Division 44 Newsletter* of the Society for the Psychological Study of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Issues, a Division of the American Psychological Association, noted:

I didn't want to like this book because the period in which it is set is so painful for me to remember. However, Fritscher does such a great job of complex character development that I could not help but like the entire cast of misfits, self-absorbed body builders, and all the other passionate characters. Fritscher pulls the reader into the movie reel of his fantasy and asks: “How can love be explained to creatures of intelligence?”...*Some Dance to Remember* is a must read...to help the younger generation understand how the older generation broke barriers that can never again be resurrected—barriers that no longer impede the earlier and earlier coming out of our youthful GLBT society.

Psychologically, on the GLBT literary scene, it's refreshing to see an author damn the politics and put a frank erotic record down. In a politically correct age, it is daring for a writer to risk his livelihood by rebelling against puritan revisionists of gay culture who don't want any airing of gay “dirty laundry.”

Fritscher is no Jack in the box.

He finished his “out-of-the-box” writing of *Some Dance* in 1984 before queer theory was invented in the 1990s. He dramatizes the anxieties and stress of gay male psychology through his characters' quest for a masculine-identified queerness so often deingranted and cock-blocked by drag and effeminate absolutists. Precisely as Foucault talked about the necessity of coining words for the love that dare not speak its name, Fritscher coined the term *homomascularity*. In seriocomic fiction, the 1970s *mise en scene* of *Some Dance* is a gender-inquiry classic that does not contradict, so much as anticipate, 1990s queer theorists' evolving questions regarding the essentialism or constructivism of gender, sexuality, class, identity, and body dysmorphism.

Readers who remember the 1970s will enjoy some quality time-travel back to a rather singular gay Eden. Readers born too late may find a whole new perspective on the spectacular party they missed during the best decade of gay sexual freedom in the twentieth century.

“Everything in the book is true,” Fritscher said, “except for what isn’t. We may miss everything we once had, but at least we had everything.”

When asked for a thumbnail of his memoir-novel, he added, “*Some Dance to Remember* is how the boys in the band played on.”

Mark Henry
San Francisco
2010