

Upstairs Over A Vacant Lot...

**This article is the first naming in print of the 1970's as
"The Golden Age" of Gay Liberation and Gay Culture...**

***THE CATACOMBS:
FISTFUCKING IN A
HANDBALL PALACE***

by
Jack Fritscher

Written December 10, 1977, for *Drummer* 23, July 1978

This feature article is based on a December 7, 1977, interview by Jack Fritscher of his friends Steve McEachern and Michael Shapley, partners at the original Catacombs. The Catacombs was in the basement of their Victorian on 21st Street between Guerrero and Valencia, San Francisco. On the first floor, Steve McEachern ran an audio transcription business, and his staff transcribed many interviews conducted by Jack Fritscher over the years for *Drummer* and other magazines.
—Mark Hemry, editor

“I chose to write this feature article as a process analysis and archetype of how a popular sex business was operated: from crowd control to supplies of towels and Crisco. In the '70s, gay venues were run as businesses. Gay liberation of the '70s was a capitalistic affair that only devolved into socialism when gay liberation was replaced in a culture-coup by gay politics. Why should anyone hold the almost MGM musical motives of Steve McEachern who rented out his basement to put on a “show,” and made a whole lot of money doing so while hosting one of the longest on-going sex orgies in the history of the world. He didn't do it because he was St. Francis of Karl Marx. He made the basement earn more per week than his busy transcription business earned upstairs. I could have written then about the habitues and politics of the Catacombs, but in 1975 when the Catacombs opened, few people were yet that trusting of gay lib's freedom from the cops that writers simply did not write about gay people by last name. By 1977 when I wrote this interview, all of us knew who the other players were, and we closed ranks around our group. This article, aimed at people who did not live in San Francisco, was also served up as an answer to some of the questions players at the Catacombs sometimes wondered about, like, how many pounds of Crisco went up how many butts.

“In 1991, Michael Shapley, years after Steve McEachern had died of a heart attack in a sling at the Catacombs, called and in a long recording made over the phone reminisced about the Catacombs culture and those of us who were there from its founding in May 1975 onwards. That conversation is not included here, but is available on audio cassette.” —JF, June 20, 2002

In Mark Thompson's nonfiction anthology, *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice*, historian Gayle Rubin, also sourcing other information regarding leatherstream timelines and themes as well as leather personalities such as Tony Tavarossi (long-time friend and intimate play pal of Jack Fritscher) from Jack Fritscher's historical writing in *Drummer* (his “Rear-View Mirror columns) and in his novel *Some Dance to Remember*, acknowledged this original article on the Catacombs as “Jack Fritscher's knowledgeable and affectionate memoir of the Twenty-First Street Catacombs in *Drummer* 23, 1978. The article,” she continues, “is accompanied by priceless photos of the interior.” Photography of the Catacombs was shot by Jack Fritscher and is © 1977, 1978, and 2002 by Jack Fritscher. —MH, editor

IF YOU WANT TO KNOW EXACTLY WHERE TONY BENNETT LEFT HIS HEART, chances are you'll find it in a footlocker at the handball palace called the Catacombs. Saturday nights, by invitation only, the baaad and the beautiful haul ass into San Francisco's Mission District.

No North Beach neon lights the location.

The Catacombs is dark and underground. Debutantes from Dubuque never find it. Only reputation, referral, and friends-of-friends-of-friends can get you down the Victorian steps, past the cement statue of a Cerberus watchdog, and up to the bell at the Joe-sent-me-door.

After you enter, you can do what you prefer and call it by the best name possible. The Combs is gay, bi, or straight, depending on the night, the guest list, and what you make it. The entrepreneur hosts are so much into “whatever’s right” that Werner Erhard, if he were hot enough to wrangle an invitation, would climb the walls, literally, while some top-fister opened his ass and raised his consciousness. In that order.

WHERE THE BIG BOYS PLAY: THE GOLDEN AGE

San Francisco is an x-rated bargain—an adult city with a nominal admission over either bridge. Sexually San Francisco enjoys a Golden Age that the rest of the US pretends not to notice. [Yes! I wrote it then, “The Golden Age.” I am not some revisionist historian making stuff up. I put concepts and phrases like “The Golden Age” in print even as events were happening, because many of us talked about the extraordinary time we realized with full awareness we were living through. And we all knew, because nothing lasts, that our time would also pass, so we engaged the erotic, social, artistic, business, and inter-personal opportunities of the decade even more intensely. –JF] After all, San Francisco is the place where, when you go there, you turn yourself inside out.

The Catacombs is the spot to blow off your socks.

By 4 AM of a Sunday dawning, you can crawl up and out of the Combs on your hands and knees into the fog and know in the future, when your whole life flashes before your dying face, if you’ve been through the Catacombs, you’re in for one hell of a rerun.

Little shots like:

! 40 men variously hanging in leather slings, tied down on restraint tables with their legs raised by shackles, or laid back on waterbeds and mattresses while 40 other men massage Crisco up their fists to start the one finger march to a full fist gliding up the asshole to the elbow.

! A tanned, mustachioed bodybuilder crucified spreadeagle, hanging face toward the heavy beamed cross, while two leather-jeaned dudes flog his shoulders and whip his ass taking time out only for six or seven fists, smallest to largest, to be plugged up his butt.

! A man with a lean blond swimmer’s body hanging up side down by his paratrooper boots from a pulley hoist, needled with multiple needles through his tits and foreskin, being enthusiastically deep-fisted by a 6’6” Texan plunge-fucking his big paw up to the USMC tattoo on his thick bicep.

This isn’t porno-fantasy. This is documentary. [I realized even as it was happening that readers might find the truth incredible; so I purposely, as a pop-culture historian, tried to record gay culture in my words, photographs, and Super-8 color films. (I taught film at university level for seven years from 1968 to 1975.) The reason there are no names in this feature article, besides the then-prevalent popularity of forbidden substances, and the reason there are no people in my photographs (which were shot one afternoon), is that it took the whole decade of the 70’s for gay men to get over the pre-liberation fear of cameras around anything or anyone gay, because of all the legal trouble, and potential for arrest or blackmail surrounding names reported in gay news. Even in 2002, homosexual identity in media is such a legal problem that people are “avowed homosexuals” or “self-identified lesbians.” One of my main tasks that I set myself as a social engineer at *Drummer* was to liberate readers into feeling free enough to send in erotic photos of themselves—which was an astounding invitation, because they weren’t models, and finally to reassure them in my friendly *Drummer* pages the time had come to show their faces in their photographs. –JF]

You don’t need fantasy head-trips at the Catacombs. The reality is heavy enough.

And the balance is perfect, sane, and civilized.

S&M at the Combs stands for Sensuality and Mutuality. Nothing happens to any man against his will. Not even a well choreographed “rape” trip. You’re safe and you know it. But if one way or another, you ask for it, you got it!

SLINGS AND NARROWS

The Catacombs is three rooms and a bath.

The first room off the entryway runs the length of a 30-foot bar. Along the walls stand built-in leather couches. Erotic art hangs in pinpoint spots. The light is low; the music, hot. Clothes are stripped and stowed around the room. The refrigerator holds the BYO beer. Heavy-duty men, arms and butts oiled in anticipation, sit casing the room, smoking jointly in the half-light. The takers cruise the tokers as the drugs lift the evening off to a full-tilt boogie.

The second room centers around the world's largest waterbed. It floats in a heavy-beamed four-poster. Single mattresses, like islands off the coast of grease, surround the waterbed. One wall holds enough bondage equipment to restrain a small SWAT team. Out of the high-ceilinged darkness comes the soft light and the hard sounds.

In the ascending order of intensity, the second room leads to the third: The Room of Main Attraction. Over the doorway the fainthearted, weak in the knees from the reality of it all, can almost imagine the writing on the wall: "Abandon yourself, all ye who enter." Wonderful abandon is all that is needed in a space where all pleasure is realized. One glance and you know this place ain't a convent. The only writing on the wall says, "No smoking or drinking beyond this point." Poppers can be used anywhere.

CONSENTING ADULTS: TAIL

The Combs' guest list is international. No invitation? No entry! No matter how far a guy has slouched from Bethlehem to search it out. The international network of men is referred mainly through the TAIL connection. TAIL (Total Ass Involvement League) is so exclusive that a guy has to be invited to subscribe to TAIL's specialty magazine. Only after that comes entree to the total TAIL circuit. TAIL and the Catacombs are separate entities. They function loosely together, socially and sexually. One is as private as the other.

FRATERNITY

Ironically, because of its low profile and because of the hosts' discretion, the Catacombs has become shrouded in mystery, fantasy, and rumor. Some guys insist that no such place as the Catacombs exists, and the reason they know for sure is because they themselves have never been there and couldn't find it when they looked for it. Others are terrified that the Combs is an S&M Palace operated by sexual terrorists. To some, the Catacombs is a political symbol of male sexism. [Actually, women often played at the Catacombs. I think particularly of Cynthia Slater, the founder of the Janus Society, with whom I played Top many times at the Catacombs—which was interesting because outside the Catacombs, Cynthia was herself conducting a sexual affair with my brother (yes, my real actual straight brother), just as she was being photographed by my bi-coastal lover, Robert Mapplethorpe, to whom I introduced her. Cynthia liked my brother, because he was straight and he could fuck her while I could Top her in S&M, so she got two very similar guys in, like, one huge experience. Oh, fuck it: she, he, and I—it was soooo 70's! So "Twosies beats onesies, but nothing beats threes" from *Cabaret*.] What this means is that people tend to project out on others their own best/worst fantasies. What this means is that some people who've never been invited for whatever reason are up to their butts in sour grapes.

In actual fact, the Catacombs is Exhibit A of an attitude that predominates in the vanilla-gay consciousness.

Many vanilla (kiss-n-hug) gay people are as uninformed on S&M as straight people are on homosexuality itself.

Many vanilla gays suffer from self-inflicted porno-violent fantasies that lie far beyond the gay S&M reality.

S&M no longer means the classic DeSade/Hitler treatment inflicted upon the unwilling.

S&M IN THE GAY CONTEXT OF CONSENTING ADULTS STANDS INITIALLY WITH THE S FOR *SENSUALITY* AND THE M FOR *MUTUALITY*.

Enough said.

The Catacombs is a handball court for consenting adults who are into a sensuality that goes beyond mere sexuality. Whole-body involvement is preferred to mere genital involvement. Heads as well as dicks get satisfied. Total body orgasm is idealized over a single spermy shot in the dark. A Let's-Pleasure-Each-Other attitude reigns. Singles have become couples and returned together to play with others. The Catacombs fosters a family aspect that a guy won't find at the anonymous tubs where if

he has some difficulty, strangers will step over his body. At the Catacombs, people are not only permissive, they responsibly look out for each other.

FOR THE BOOKS

[These statistics are directly from Catacomb's owner Steve McEachern's notes in his books.] On an average Saturday night, the Catacombs goes through nearly 40 pounds of Crisco (figuring a half pound per ass), nearly 300 towels, and 2,000 gallons of water (using a total of 30,000 gallons a month). The Catacombs opened officially on May 7, 1975, and at the First Anniversary Party hosted a one-night record of 250 guests. Two "runs" to the country have been sponsored out of the Catacombs.

What future direction The Combs takes is up to the changing tastes of the hosts and the guests. Nothing succeeds like variety, and The Combs is the place where, if you've wanted a permissive and protected spot to do your specialty, you'll find the atmosphere supportive enough and the environment creative enough, that if you can't get it on there, you're not going to find it easily anywhere. [And of the thousands of people who played at the Catacombs only one man ever died at there, at least while I was present. Dr. Dick Hamilton attended to him and the body was out the door before any consternation occurred.] © 1977, 1978, 2002 Jack Fritscher