

Dune Body

Written Thanksgiving 1977 and published in *Drummer* 20, January 1978.

- I. Author's Eyewitness Historical-Context Introduction written July 25, 1998
- II. The poem as published in *Drummer* 20, January 1978

I. Author's Eyewitness Historical-Context Introduction written July 25, 1998

Gay magazine writing was the GLBT reality show of the 1970s. In 1974, I wrote a magazine book analyzing TV titled *Television Today*. The twin media of magazines and small screen intermeshed. Television was finding its true signature and fundamental style in the immediacy of “reality TV” which began with the Loud Family in the hit series *An American Family* on PBS in 1973. In 1975, gay magazine writing in *Drummer* had to invent its “reality vision and voice” on the spot, ad-libbing reflexively, to keep up with the speeding styles of emerging gay life spontaneously combusting in the bars, baths, and on the street: Castro Street, Polk Street, Christopher Street, and Santa Monica Boulevard.

A magazine is a hungry beast that must be fed every thirty days, and it's a finicky eater.

As editor in chief, sometimes I had a full page of rambunctious journalism in *Drummer* that needed to have three empty “column inches” filled, and I needed something tasty: a photo, a drawing, a joke.

Sometimes a photographer from Nowhere, Indiana, or Hubbub, Texas, would send in a snapshot that worked as an image, but needed suggestive caption words to point up its grass-roots *verite*, or to pump up its literal look into erotic fantasy.

Other times, byzantine business conducted in trade under the table, and pillow talk shared in a tiny room at the tubs, shaped the pages and sometimes the covers of *Drummer*. In summer 1977, LA photographer Joe Tiffenbach sent us some photographs that publisher John Embry said he had commissioned in West Hollywood in 1976 before Embry was “ridden out of town on a rail” — which is the way most gays leave their hometowns.

Embry insisted he had paid good hard cash for the photos which I did not like because they seemed like Palm Springs “camp” starring a blond twinkie who did not drip “essence du *Drummer*.” The willowy model was perfectly fine if an audience got off on young vanilla twinks; but my judgement was based on the criterion of how he would be received or rejected in the leather bars or leather bathhouses frequented by *Drummer* readers. Embry and I had a heated discussion over what was “the *Drummer* Look.” (Our first tiff was over Tiffenbach.) A publisher trumps an editor, but mostly I surrendered because I respected some of Tiffenbach’s other credentials. Historically, Joe Tiffenbach (aka Lou Alton) was the founder with Bud Berkeley of the crusading anti-circumcision group, the Uncut Society of America (USA), and he had directed sometime *Drummer* columnist and full-time LA leather personality Fred Halsted in the film *Truck It* (1973). After his photos appeared in *Drummer*, Tiffenbach went on to direct videos in the 1980s, and with Bud Berkeley penned the book, *Foreskin: Its Past, Present, and Future* (1984); he died, age 67, January 27, 1992.

Even though Tiffenbach’s twink, who had no tread on his nipples, was too much the tyro to be leather, the desert images were — if I screwed up my eyes and squinted to erase the “camp” — at least vaguely fetishistic in a “sports sex” sort of way. The sunny photos themselves lacked the shadows and drama essential to S&M art, and were not ominous the way, for instance, that Mapplethorpe made his outdoor photography fetishistic and threatening.

At a glance, the subject was a neutrally naked male solo in the sand dunes. Like a human “4-wheeler all-terrain vehicle,” he was spreadeagle horizontally holding onto (not tied to) one axle with two hands while his feet stretched out to a second axle. Both axles were fitted out with two bicycle tires. The male body was taut between the axles, his butt was high off the ground, and he seemingly was rolling face down through the sand on the four wheels. Because I was well advanced in prepping my “Gay Jock Sports” feature article, I figured I could shoehorn the twink in if I tried to re-conceptualize him as a kind of “Arthur Tress man” as “sports machine.” (See “Meditations on Arthur Tress, *Drummer* 30, June 1979, pages 22-25.)

Muddying the aggressive butch theme of *Drummer* 20, Embry at first gave no indication that he was planning to put the deadpan twink on what was to have been the lively cover of the homomasculine gay sports issue which was based on an original theme that I had built conceptually from the ground up almost two years before anyone even heard of Tom Waddell’s scheme for his Gay Olympics. I wanted *Drummer* and leather to be sexually *avant garde*. Embry’s *retro garde* 1950s camp twink — lacking

even basic 1970s *de rigueur* facial hair—was almost as wrongheaded a *faux pas* as was his widely scorned “Cycle Sluts” drag cover on *Drummer* 9.

In this *mise en scene*, I tugged on Tiffenbach’s photo-image—as if it were one of those new 1976 “Stretch Armstrong” dolls—to reference the hit TV series *The Six Million Dollar Man* (1973-1978). (Its bionic hero, pop icon Lee Majors, *Drummer* 25, page 70, led to the complete bio-machinery of the perfectly cast action puppet, the never-erotic Arnold Schwarzenegger, in *The Terminator*, 1984.) As it turned out, these desert photos, and this poem, anticipated by more than a year the gasoline-and-leather epic of the sandy desert outback, *Mad Max* (1979), featuring the debut of the gay leather favorite, Mel Gibson, before he outed himself as a seeming homophobe and drunken anti-Semite.

To twist the Tiffenbach pictures into a specifically *Drummer* theme, I made his literal concept symbolic (or at least fetishistic) by turning the wheels into a rolling sex machine and the hairless twinkie body into a kind of android car.

Under Embry’s retro taste and penny-pinching, I held my nose and dropped the pics into a poem sidebar to—what turned out to be—the first magazine article ever written on gay sports, the cover lead feature article: “Gay Jock Sports: Wrestling, Boxing, Rollerballing, Soaring, Scuba, Bodybuilding, Dune Bodies, and Films,” *Drummer* 20 (January 1978).

But was that enough? Of course, not. This was *Drummer*!

John Embry was the prince of reprints. The general observation was that his re-run reputation eventually hurt *Drummer* subscriptions and sales because of the way he repeated stories and recycled photos and drawings. His practice also dismayed some writers and artists, and photographers like Mapplethorpe, who often felt they had not been paid royalties for such reprint rights.

Some battles are not worth fighting when faggots work together in a creative environment trying to turn out a magazine that is so interactive with the reader that it causes orgasm.

Nevertheless, I was chagrined, but not surprised, when nine months later, Embry squeezed one more dime out of Tiffenbach’s twinkie’s ass. Perhaps thinking that “sand is sand,” he had art director Al Shapiro paste three spreadeagle-bondage photographs from the sands of Palm Springs into the copy of my desert-sands article, “Arab Death,” in my special edition, *Son of Drummer* (September 1978).

Embry might not have dared cross swords had he decoded my byline on “Arab Death” which I signed as “by Denny Sargent.” I suspect he had no idea who “by Denny Sargent” was on page 9, but all he had to do was turn to page 41 where I published an excerpt from my 1969 novel,

I Am Curious (Leather), which I subtitled in *Son of Drummer* as “The Adventures of Denny Sargent” — “by Jack Fritscher.” The first line of the novel and the excerpt included the name of my protagonist in ALL CAPS: “DENNY SARGENT, eighteen, kicked his sheets to the floor.”

I always thought Embry seemed rather curiously vague about the actual contents of *Drummer*. Did he ever really read it? Did he ever jerk off to it? Was he like a movie-studio mogul who never watches his pictures, and only discusses box-office tallies?

Embry, always keen on mail-order sales, wanted to reprint *I Am Curious (Leather)* because gay book stores had yet to be invented, and closeted gays in Speed Trap, Florida, needed mail-order goods. If they were going to order *Drummer* poppers, they might as well order *Drummer* books. Embry announced on page 47 that “*I Am Curious (Leather)* is to be a forthcoming *Drummer* novel.” Earlier, the 1969 novel had been published in a limited private edition by Lou Thomas at Target Studio (1972), and after *Son of Drummer*, after Embry defaulted, it was serialized in *Man-2Man Quarterly* 1980-1982, excerpted in several magazines, and then sold 10,000 copies for Winston Leyland’s Gay Sunshine Press under the title *Leather Blues* (1984).

In “Dune Body,” the line “Oasis of erect palms” is the first intimation of my “Palm Drive Video” play on words. “Palm Drive” is not the name of a street. “Palm Drive” is what a man does with his hand while reading or watching porno.

From the day I first edited *Drummer*, and as a former university professor teaching cinema, I calculated that the magazine could grow its brand name into a very successful Super-8 film business. In the 1970s we all knew about the coming joys of video, but the corporate wars between the Beta and VHS systems kept consumer cameras and VCRs out of our driving palms until 1981 when it was too late to tape the sights and sounds of the Titanic 1970s which history would regard quite differently had video offered up eyewitness documentation of the way we were before VHS and HIV. At a Boston book reading in the 1990s, I was asked by a young woman working on a college paper if she could see the videotape I shot of the Stonewall Rebellion!

In “Dune Body,” echoing Allen Ginsberg chanting, I intoned my DJ mix of mythology, Joycean portmanteau words, erotic parallax metaphor, and world-weary sexiness. I wrote a free-association rap-and-slam poem to amuse *Drummer* readers who, in that literate day and age before the Great Dumbing of America, could rather “dig” this kind of beatnik stuff.

Marching to something different in *Drummer*, Thoreau might have smiled at the beatnik bongo drums punctuating the rhythm of the lines.

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

Dune Body

Dune body babyman,
stretched on spreadeagle wheels,
the CHP oughta getta shotta you:
hot mirage of *haute* stuff.

High noon of dust and lust,
Icarus rolling,
sunsweat of your solar-power body,
a quart of Quaker State to oil you up
with my calloused hand.

Oasis of erect palms.

I wanna fill your tank,
blow your carbs,
drive you all the way home
(9 inches: highway; 10 inches: city),
take flying leaps
at your silver spokes.

Christ. Your shock-absorbing back;
shooting over hot desert humps,
rolling down dunes at me, dick in hand,
ready for your pit-stop lube job, baby.

Ain't mirages when you rub 'em
s'pose to disappear? Thought you'd vanish
like some golden-tan dust devil,
leaving in the sand the trail
of your steel-radial cock and balls.
Swing lower, sweet chariot!

So come on, Sport,
show me what you do
for your next trick.

DRUMMER

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Australia \$2.70/Belgie 150 frs.
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France 16 NF
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Nederland 12 Fl.
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TOM OF FINLAND
CALENDAR

Cover Photograph by
Joe Tiffenbach ISSUE 20
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