

Steve Reeves' Screen Test

Written September 22-24, 1977, by Jack Fritscher with additional line-item material by Al Shapiro (A. Jay) and John Embry (Robert Payne), this feature essay was published in *Drummer* 19, December 1977.

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I. Author's Eyewitness Historical-Context Introduction written December 11, 2000

Gladiator Muscles and Beard:
Constructing the Subtext "Look" of *Drummer*

Steve Reeves (1926-2000)
Drummer Publisher John Embry (b. 1926)

In the "School of Camp," publisher John Embry seemed a graduate student who had studied and taken his orals in the best cocktail bars in LA during the 1950s.

He knew how to cut to the chaise longue.

He never saw a photo layout that did not need cartoon balloons. In fact, because he was such a fan of the camp cartoon strips, such as *Harry Chess*, in the 1960s *Queen's Quarterly* (QQ), he hired the author of that strip, A. Jay (Al Shapiro) to be the founding San Francisco art director of *Drummer*. In the Great Gay Migration, we were all three sex-immigrants to San Francisco: Shapiro (in 1974) whom I knew from Manhattan; Embry (in 1975) whom I had just met from Los Angeles; and myself, visiting as often as possible since August 1961, and arriving officially in May 1970.

We were the three-way that transformed LA *Drummer* into San Francisco *Drummer*.

For details of our salad days together, see my A. Jay obituary, “The Passing of One of *Drummer’s* First Daddies,” in *Drummer* 107 (August 1987).

In this last issue of the “Teen-Age *Drummer*,” *Drummer* 19, Steve Reeves caused Embry and me to debate whether *camp* and *eros* can exist together; actually, we were in truth arm-wrestling about the identity of *Drummer*. Was the mag merely a QQ clone in leather drag as Embry portrayed it with his Cycle Sluts gender-bender drag cover of *Drummer* 9, or was it to be serious male erotic entertainment readers could jerk off to while still getting the “*Drummer* Philosophy” modeled on Hugh Hefner’s *Playboy*. (Notice the Hefner-style of three photos of the interviewee at the bottom of the first page in interviews with Richard Locke, *Drummer* 24, and Wakefield Poole, *Drummer* 27.) The little tempest over camp was one of many of our creative differences.

At that beginning, none of us gents wanted to be a spoilsport; so we three had a fun time tossing around captions satirizing Hollywood, because the pop culture of movies was always a huge part of *Drummer*.

Citing that most of the publicity photos were from my personal collection, I made one request: that the jokes be printed as text under the photographs, where true fans and masturbators could ignore them, and not, as Embry’s dreaded cartoon balloons, be pasted on the pictures or over Steve Reeves’s body. I felt a responsibility toward Steve Reeves. In 1959, I came out on his *Hercules*; I went in “straight” and came out “homomasculine.” I found out about “gayism” only later.

It was in this pictorial feature that I first printed one of my many satirical names for Arnold Schwarzenegger whom I have always scorned, not for being 260 pounds of ham in a two-ounce nylon posing brief, but for being unforgivably not hot. Arnold was 180-degrees of separation from Steve Reeves who was the bearded muscle god of my nocturnal emissions. He was to me what heroic Catholic martyr-saints and Catholic priests should look like. In the secret subtext of Joe Weider’s muscle magazines of my perfervid 1950s, Steve Reeves defined the homomasculine Platonic Ideal.

Steve Reeves was thirteen years old when I was born and I don’t really remember his first movie appearance in Ed Woods’ rock-n-roll teen-movie *Jailbait* (1954) which I most likely saw in some double-feature; but that same summer when I was fifteen, he rocked my world on the big screen when I went to see the MGM musical *Athena* (1954) and watched the unsinkable Debbie Reynolds upstaged by the luminous screen heat of Steve Reeves.

Five years later, I was twenty years old and hot to trot when producer Joseph E. Levine released the widescreen Italian movie *Hercules* (1959).

Steve Reeves shot to international stardom, and I shot all over the balcony seats. That summer, the overgrown boy, Schwarzenegger, posing in a mirror in Austria, was nearly thirteen years old with visions of what dancing in his head?

Hercules imprinted me forever with the erotic metaphor of muscle. That day I began my search for the perfect body. I was a Platonist raised by two Platonist parents; and that day my mind and my dick knew instantly that the noble ideal of an uncompromised man was possible. I didn't really know what homosexuality was. So in memory I wonder if I looked like a silly young fairy, standing on my tongue in the lobby of the Madison Theater in Peoria, bargaining with the manager to sell me one or two publicity photos of Steve Reeves. "It's illegal to sell them," he said, "but if you never say where you got them, I'll give them to you for ten cents each." I countered with an offer he couldn't refuse, and afterwards he who was an old man of twenty-eight gave me the photos in gratitude.

Steve Reeves grew up in Oakland and in San Francisco where he built his legs bicycling up the hills. He was a natural beauty with a sweet personality. Schwarzenetc, whom I met in 1971 at the Muscle Beach iron pit in Venice, was not, never was, never will be. "Vy are you taking my picture?" Arnold scowled. "I'm not taking your picture," I said, "I'm shooting him. [Ken Waller]." Waller was a strawberry blond hunk, freckled, affable, and my type.

"You must ask," Arnold said, "to take my picture."

"I didn't take your picture. In fact, you got in the way of the picture I was taking."

"Fag," he muttered.

"Kraut," I muttered.

(We are both of Austrian extraction.)

As he turned his back to me, I snapped my camera again just to piss him off.

I walked away with four color transparencies of the incident. My camera is my eyewitness.

Arnold was, to my eye, Exhibit A of why steroids as a concern entered my 1970s journals of Folsom and Castro which turned into the steroid-rage-driven plot of *Some Dance to Remember*. All these crystal-meth generations later, many queer historians do not realize that steroids—not coke or speed—were the most abused drug in 1970s gay culture. Ironically, steroids became for some a therapy to treat symptoms of AIDS, and the hard, basketball belly became an emblem of AIDS culture in the bear community.

Anyway, the harmonious three-way of Embryo-Shapiro-Fritscher was interrupted when John Embry grew suddenly and then increasingly ill.

While the declining John Embry pasted his dialog balloons on every photo in sight, and while I wanted the graphics to speak for themselves, the extremely patient and diplomatic Al Shapiro spent much of his time pasting down balloons John Embry told him to put back after I had told Al to peel them off.

Actually, in these early San Francisco issues (18, 19, and 20) before John Embry became so seriously ill that he had to be absent from *Drummer* for several months, we three had strained but rather good times.

I was no stranger to long-term illness; I had become editor less than a year after my own father died from a terrible twelve-year ordeal during which he had twenty-two surgeries and was frequently in ICU—one time for over six months. So my empathy, sympathy, and my life experience was there for John Embry when he was struck with what we all were told at that time was colon cancer.

Al and I, left to our own devices, went to bat to make the new kid in town, *Drummer*, into a success.

After a regimen of many months, including surgery, treatment, and recovery, by the time John Embry had returned to relative health and to *Drummer*, the magazine in his absence had become a new kind of hit (no one had seen anything like it before), and his mood toward Al Shapiro and me in the *Drummer* office changed dramatically. Was he depressed? Was he jealous? He seemed disgruntled. We had not hijacked *Drummer*; we had simply plugged it into the times.

Who can read anyone else's mind, but, in my opinion, Al and I—plus catastrophic illness—inadvertently made Embry feel his age smack dab in the middle of the revolutionary 1960s-1970s American Youth Culture intensified by gay culture's fetish of youth. Born in 1926—the same year as Steve Reeves, Embry was a generation older than all of us. He had certainly been formed during a different gay time in a different pre-gay age. His persona seemed more of the “Johnny Ray 1950s” than the “acid-rock 1960s” and he seemed not attuned to the emerging post-Stonewall macho of 1970s leather culture that turned *Drummer* into a hyper-masculine world full of bizarre new sex trips. The most leather I ever saw John Embry wear was a black leather vest—oh, and one of those de rigueur Muir leather caps from Canada. We all wore that hat in homage to Brando in *The Wild One*. I especially prized as fetish wear my 1950s, pre-Muir, biker cap made of black cloth with a shiny white plastique brim given to me in 1969 by the Catholic leather priest, Jim Kane, who also gave me an authentic swastika pin, large as a brooch or medal, but I could never justify wearing it, even as a fetish item, on the front of the cap where he pinned it.

Summary: In LA, *Drummer* had been strangely conceived by eros out of politics. *Drummer* 9 camped up a virtually “suicidal” drag cover that had readers threatening to cancel subscriptions. And 1) when *Drummer* was ten months old, the publisher and editor in chief got busted by the LAPD for hosting a “Slave Auction.” At that point, the infant *Drummer* imploded, and nearly died. Then 2), the publisher became at least a bit distracted from editorial production by the lawyering and by his court appearances stemming from his LA arrest as well as from his culture-altering move of *Drummer* from LA to San Francisco that changed the *Drummer* staff, the talent pool, and the demographic. Finally, 3), the publisher seemed rather withdrawn because of what turned out to be the worrying onset of cancer in 1978, and unavailable during his Spring 1979 cancer surgery and recuperation when he turned over production of the magazine to art director Al Shapiro and editor in chief Jack Fritscher.

My mission was to keep “camp” out of *Drummer*—which didn’t work in these “Steve Reeves” captions referencing the pop culture of the cruising novel *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*, the musical *A Chorus Line*, and television commercials for Charmin Toilet Tissue: “Please, don’t squeeze the Charmin!” I added the sexual slam against comedian Richard Pryor (who was from my hometown) because Pryor had in 1977 ranted against queers and fags during his performance with Lily Tomlin at the Hollywood Bowl: “You Hollywood faggots can kiss my happy, rich black ass.” The slap against John Briggs was included because he was the California legislator who began the anti-gay “Briggs Initiative” (Proposition 6, 1978) that cost the gay community so much in time and money to defeat so that gays could continue to teach in public schools. Briggs was the West Coast pal of cuntry-western singer Anita Bryant in Dade County, Florida.

In San Francisco, *Drummer* had to change its essence in order to reflect the readers. (Note my inclusion of the East Coast code for wearing chains on the “left” or “right” versus the West Coast code.)

Here was the theorem I concocted: *Drummer* got its identity from the identity of the readers and then reflected their identity back to them.

I had grown up in a family of priests and sales people. My father was a champion salesman; my mother worked in marketing. As a teenager, I sold Hoover vacuum cleaners door to door, learning empathy for shut-ins and how to deal with the human condition in the privacy of lonely people’s homes. I was a teenage seminarian from age fourteen to twenty-four. I was like a visiting priest, but, more, I was a visiting writer. I learned how to

turn those depressing death-of-a-teenage-salesman encounters into writing for Catholic magazines. I learned how to make the stories and features reflect the reality I saw behind closed doors as well as the beliefs and identities of the readers.

With Embry missing in action, and with Al so cooperative, I took my whip and began driving *Drummer* with all the talented contributors I could find. The “Letters to the Editor” changed, and circulation rose to 42,000—its highest point then or since.

This “Steve Reeves” feature is, queer historians may note, listed at the “Unofficial Steve Reeves’ Page” at geocities.com which lists “Fritscher, Jack, ‘Steve Reeves’ Screentest,” *Drummer* 19 (December 1977) and reviews it as “a parody of a typical Steve Reeves movie with captioned stills. Kind of mean, but really funny!”

So, maybe John Embry was right!

Humor and eros can co-exist.

Not.

Nobody ever jerked off to a joke.

Nobody ever came to camp.

On my book shelf is a privately produced book, *Worlds to Conquer: An Authorized Biography of Steve Reeves* (1999) by Chris LeClaire, 190 photos, many previously unpublished; 256 pages, Chris LeClaire Publishing, PO Box 116, South Chatham MA 02659, \$29.95.

I wrote the single paragraph introducing the photo feature and co-wrote, and then edited, the one-liner photo captions from the three of us.

Finally, in the zero degrees of separation, I connected the dots from Steve Reeves to the world heavy-weight champion boxer, Primo Carnera, who co-starred in *Hercules Unchained* (1959). In 1989, when it was time to pick the cover of the first edition of *Some Dance to Remember: A Memoir-Novel of San Francisco 1970-1982*, I insisted that publisher Knights Press print a George Mott photograph of the Art Deco statue of Primo Carnera commissioned by Mussolini in the 1930s for the 1944 Olympic Games planned for his Foro Italico in Rome. When Knights Press suddenly declared bankruptcy, I so respected Mott as a fellow artist that I personally paid him the fee Knights Press owed him for the use of his intellectual property. Because people judge a book by its cover, Mott’s photo helped make *Some Dance to Remember* both popular and controversial. In 2003, thirteen years after Mott’s photograph appeared on *Some Dance to Remember* (1990), his book, *Foro Italico: Photographs by George Mott*, was published by Powerhouse Books, New York, with introductory essays by Giorgio Armani, Michelangelo Sabatino, and Luigi Ballerini.

Editor's Note: This feature is early documentation of Fritscher's long-standing satirizing of Schwarzenegger. Visit a search engine such as Google for "Schwarzenegger + Mapplethorpe + Fritscher" to read about the political eBay censorship scandal as reported by the Associated Press, October 5, 2003. —Mark Henry

II. The feature essay as published in *Drummer* 19, December 1977

**A Photo-Spread of the Movies'
Most Handsome Muscle Man...**

Steve Reeves' Screen Test

It is no secret that the dialogue for most Italian-produced muscle epics is put in later and the voices belong to actors other than those on the screen. Many have wondered what the voice of mighty Steve Reeves really sounds like. That, we can't bring you. But we can fill you in on what was *really* being said in some of these Reeves' *pas de deux* from the muscle-musical *Barbell Romance*, an Arnold Schwarzenegger film in Steroidoscope. Photos courtesy of Alan Tuck. Dialogue by Jack Fritscher, Robert Payne, and the hangers-on around the art room [A. Jay], who would be most happy to give Mr. Reeves equal time, should he care to come around.

"Okay, Steve. You can breathe out now. Steve...Steve?"

"Let's see. For an S, it's chains on the right. Or is it left? Or is it left for Top on the West Coast and right for the Top in New York? Or is it in the middle for the Midwest?"

"I swear I'll never again squeeze the Charmin."

"Tits and ass won't get you jobs—unless they're yours."

"Get down, sweathog, and lick my pits."

"Alright, who threw that pie?"

"What do you guys mean the scene isn't over? I distinctly heard the director yell, 'Cut.'"

"What the fuck you mean you gave my name at the clinic?"

Excerpt source: ©Jack Fritscher, *Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer*, San Francisco: Palm Drive Publishing, 2008

“Are you positive this is how Nureyev auditioned for *Valentino*?”

“Steve stretches between two horses’ asses. Co-starring as the gelding on the left is Richard Pryor. The mare on the right is Rep. John Briggs.”

“I told you to fuck off. I’m looking for Mr. Goodbar.”

“When something’s over, whatever happened to shaking hands and saying goodbye?”

“Steve [swinging a huge chain above his head] warms up for one of singer Anita Bryant’s greatest hits...”

III. Eyewitness Illustrations

Steve Reeves, Mr. Pacific Coast (1946), Mr. Western America (1947), Mr. America AAU (1947), Mr. World (1948), Mr. Universe (1950). Steve Reeves, raised in San Francisco, set the 1940s-1950s standard for heroic American manhood. Tim Curry as Dr. Frank-N-Furter opens *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* singing, “We could take in an old Steve Reeves movie.” He was born in 1926, the same year as *Drummer* founding publisher John Embry. Publicity photo.

Steve Reeves’s gladiator movies inspired Steven Saylor (Aaron Travis), author of *Slaves of the Empire* and his ongoing series *Roma Sub Rosa*. Having been an early AIDS-Era 1980s fiction editor at *Drummer* under publisher John Embry, Saylor wrote a line consonant with editor in chief Jack Fritscher’s Titanic 1970s experience. Working at *Drummer* was “mind-boggling and mind-numbing—we were underpaid, disrespected and overstimulated on a daily basis...” —*Steam*, Vol. 2 #1 (1994).

Reeves represented the epitome of virile nobility and homomascularity to teenage boys in the 1950s who grew up to be subscribers to *Drummer* magazine in the 1970s where they wanted to see variations on the kind of masculinity that was their spring awakening. Reeves’ beard, quoted on various faces of 1960s Colt models such as Ledermeister, greatly influenced the beards, moustaches, and sideburns that graced gay faces in the 1970s, and led to the glorification of male secondary sex characteristics (facial and body hair, musculature, deep voice) within the bear movement organized by Richard Bulger in the 1980s.

“Why should you be on the cover
of *Some Dance to Remember*?”

Top: Publicity photo. In *Hercules Unchained* (1960), Steve Reeves wrestled with longtime international sensation, world-heavyweight boxing champion Primo Carnera, the Italian athlete sculpted in the 1930s into an heroic statue for Mussolini's Foro Italico stadium in Rome. As thematic warning against the tyranny of “body fascism” in gay culture, Fritscher insured that a photograph of the Fascist statue of Carnera by New York photographer George Mott appeared on the cover of the first edition of *Some Dance to Remember: A Memoir-Novel of San Francisco 1970-1982*. On page 195 of the 2005 edition, the oracular Solly Blue says: “Gays and Fascists. Both consider themselves the ultimate elite. Don't forget that.” Bottom: Publicity photo of Steve Reeves published as the cover of *Physique Pictorial*, Summer 1959.

