

CHAPTER 17

WHEN QUEERS COLLIDE HOW GAY CIVIL WARS KILLED OUR STONEWALL MOMENT

- **Leather Historians: Critical Thinking and Fact-Checking *Drummer*, the First Draft of Leather History**
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Suddenly in the 1970s we were in the brave new world of corporate gay publishing. That peculiar kind of indentured servitude is not why young authors get into writing, but the age-old business model was there, a kind of necessary evil, constricting the free spirit of being gay, and exploiting the passion of writers burning to be published.

Immediately after Stonewall, gay liberation became a commodity coopted and commercialized by corporate businesses intent on selling our voices, our art, and our identity as product from *Drummer* and *The Advocate* to the startup in the mid-1980s of gay book publishers who were no more saintly than straight publishers.

A gay book publisher is a member of the 1% who buys the work of authors who are the 99% to whom he or she pays only 7-10% of the cover price. A gay magazine publisher, buying rights, pays far less than any minimum wage.

All writers from Joe Anonymous to Edmund White to Larry Townsend, and publishers from Winston Leyland to Sasha Alyson to David Goodstein

to John Embry, had to learn how to make their gay business work within the straight business model.

Gay culture in the 1970s had a fast and steep learning curve as profit replaced innocence with the drama, intrigues, jealousies, and ambitions around cash, competition, and assimilation. Segregated for so long from the straight world, we thought our gay world was somehow superior, but as soon as given the chance, we sold out our Eden, and all hell broke loose.

The gay media business was born.

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John Embry was never transparent or accountable. His public life, at least his thirty stentorian years in leather publishing to which I was both an eyewitness and accomplice (1975-2009), was one long grudge match of “Embry VS The World.” Masking his jealousies masking his greed, Embry filled the few published sections of his autobiography, *Epilogue*, with his own remembered agenda. His selected memories are as validly *Rashomon* as anyone’s. His papers and memoir stand open to anthropologists, critical thinkers, and ironic comedians as a forensic dig of internal evidence of his pugnacious mindset in the pages of *Drummer* and his other magazines.

As a gay mail-order salesman, John Embry was the Willy Loman of gay publishing. Both men were drummers peddling their wares. I think attention must be paid to whatever baggage the cunning Embry left behind in any of his polemical periodicals, manuscripts, and archives. Any bits of his memoir, *Epilogue*, must be evaluated critically and fact-checked historically as must mine and other Folsom Street historians such as the photographer-memoirist Jim Stewart and feminist-Marxist anthropologist Gayle Rubin. The huckster had tales to tell and he was never afraid to rant loudly in print about cops, competitors, and staff. When proved to be true, or revealed as false, his then adjusted recall may help reveal an even more objective story of *Drummer* which as a cultural force was bigger than any of us who created it.

As documented by letter and by email after 2001, I offered several times to interview Embry about his “take” on *Drummer*, but he always declined because, I think, as a publisher he knew investigative journalists pursue facts, nuance, and accountability. Nevertheless, despite the blood under our bridge, my former employer asked me four times if I were interested in copy-editing his long-gestating manuscript of *Epilogue*. Like him, I demurred. I always answered: “Not now. Maybe later. When my own writing is completed.” As editor, I did not want to repair his manuscript the way I had to shine up most of the manuscripts submitted to me at *Drummer*, including

John Preston's raw first draft of *Mr. Benson*. Oftentimes, authors "hate" editors who do what editors must. Instead of Embry paying me to edit his manuscript, I paid him a substantial amount for reprint rights for two selections from *Epilogue* to use as evidence, inclusive from his point of view, in my logging of *Drummer* history. That was rich: me paying him after him not paying me for my work in *Drummer*.

By 1998, Embry was not only trying to collect his own memoirs, he was also trying to reconstitute his own greatest hits of 1970s classic *Drummer* in his new *Manifest Reader* magazines. So he asked me for permission to reprint several of my articles and stories from that free-love "Golden Age of *Drummer*, 1977-1980," which was a different *Drummer* from the safe-sex *Drummer* (1980s-1990s) circumscribed by AIDS, political correctness, and leather contests. That golden run of *Drummer* (issues 19-30) was also very different from the *Drummer* (issues 1-18) that had fled LA, bullied, and beaten almost out of business by the LAPD.

If Embry and his erstwhile LA founding fellows of *Drummer* had not quarreled among themselves, if they hadn't given each other the attitude of feuding bit players at a Hollywood studio, if they hadn't alienated their peers contributing to *Drummer*, if they hadn't caused most of their own LAPD troubles, they might have launched *Drummer* into an earlier, higher, better, brighter orbit in that first decade of gay liberation after Stonewall.

Instead, Embry estranged his collaborators like Jeanne Barney and Fred Halsted and Larry Townsend, dumped *Drummer* in the LA political toilet, and fled to San Francisco. The convenient irony was that the reputation of *Drummer* as a "fugitive outlaw" fit into sexual outlawry of Folsom Street culture, but the tempestuous mail-order mogul Embry could not shed his attitudinal LA roots. He remained in laidback San Francisco what he had been in quarrelsome LA. San Francisco in the 1970s was still very much a 1960s Haight-Ashbury love commune evolving into the new concept of gay community. The smack talk that Embry and his peers in LA cocktail bars applauded as campy blood-sport infighting was a lifestyle choice of words and attitude not liked by men on Folsom and Castro streets.

From the 1960s, up until Larry Townsend and John Embry died (2008 and 2010), Embry's feuding and fussing LA *Drummer* Salon famously fought like cats and dogs. Their tiffs made for legendary gossip and giggles. Perhaps fancying their coterie as an LA Algonquin Club, they were wits halfway between Theater of the Absurd and Theater of Cruelty. And then they'd all go out to lunch. Again. Always at the French Quarter Restaurant at 7985 Santa Monica Boulevard in West Hollywood where San Franciscans Mark Henry and I were invited several times to join the LA pals who were

that day deigning to speak to each other. Always bitching about the parking, they went into that coffee shop to see and be seen.

With its overwrought-iron decor of main-floor plaza dining and surrounding balconies straight out of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the French Quarter was a surging tide pool of cruising talent. So many colorful WeHo characters from the gyms, bars, and streets swam around its dining tables and sex boutiques, no one ever cared about the food because the people-watching was worth the cost, carbs, and calories. Fascinating to me among the many sex-toy and greeting-card boutiques surrounding the dining plaza was the office front of a doctor whose one-stop specialty was prescribing steroids, the most closeted drug in gay culture.

Even as AIDS arrived in the 1980s, up in the Hollywood Hills, on Sunday afternoons around a certain doctor's swimming pool, the steroids stood posing on one side of the sparkling blue water and the checkbooks stood shopping on the other. In 1992, another LA doctor, whose deleted name I remember musclemen invoking with reverence in serious gyms even in San Francisco, pleaded guilty to one count of receiving illegal steroids, with more than twenty charges against him dropped.

The crisis between the two lovers in my *Some Dance to Remember*, star-crossed because one was a bodybuilder from LA and one was a writer from San Francisco, was caused by steroids' devastating roid-rage effect on the personality.

My experience in getting that *Drummer* novel published revealed that magazine publisher John Embry was no worse and no better than the many book publishers who exploit authors whom, for all their original work, they pay so little. Few authors dare write exposes about publishers for fear of never being published again. Whistle-blowers rarely win.

Analogously, my problems were nothing compared to the travails of the underestimated American author Margaret Mitchell who created one of the world's great gay icons in Scarlett O'Hara. Mitchell's Scarlett is the sinequa-non archetype of Tennessee Williams' Blanche DuBois, as well as of my protagonist Ryan O'Hara, the magazine editor, in *Some Dance to Remember*. *Gone with the Wind* informs *Some Dance*, which transports Mitchell's Civil War "romance" dynamic to the civil war over sex, race, and gender on Castro and Folsom streets. Ryan is several times referred to as "Miss Scarlett." In my gay spin, Ryan (Scarlett) turns the tables on his lover Kick (Rhett), and, tossing Kick out for bad behavior, declares the equivalent of: "This time, Rhett Butler, you get out! I don't give a damn." So for several reasons, I found fascinating an eye-opening book chronicling the epic struggles between author and publisher in Ellen F. Brown and John Wiley's cautionary tale,

Margaret Mitchell's Gone With the Wind: A Bestseller's Odyssey from Atlanta to Hollywood (2011). It was, in fact, Margaret Mitchell's lifelong crusade, waged internationally, that helped change international copyright law to protect authors against publishers.

In an eyewitness *Drummer* "open letter" written August 24, 1994, former *Drummer* editor, Tim Barrus lacerated Embry for failing to live up to a publisher's responsibilities. Barrus was the founder of the 1990s San Francisco literary movement "LeatherLit" which published Geoff Mains' *Urban Aborigines*. Gay studies scholar Claude Summers' writing about the legendary Barrus in *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage* noted: "Some of the best pornographic fiction to come out of the leatherman tradition is by Tim Barrus." In the zero degrees of separation, I must disclose that after Barrus exited *Drummer*, he began working at Knights Press, Stamford, Connecticut. There in early 1989 he advised LeatherLit publisher, Elizabeth Gershman, to acquire my *Some Dance to Remember: A Memoir-Novel of San Francisco 1970-1982*, which Tony DeBlase, recognizing *Some Dance* as "a *Drummer* novel," had excerpted as "cover fiction" for *Drummer* 124 (December 1988). That specific *Drummer* connection (1988) helped launch that book (1990) the way that my feature obituary for Robert Mapplethorpe in *Drummer* 133 (September 1989) led to another book contract for *Mapplethorpe: Assault with a Deadly Camera* (1994). Previously, in 1984, twenty pieces of my fiction and features from *Drummer* compelled Winston Leyland of Gay Sunshine Press to publish my anthology *Corporal in Charge of Taking Care of Captain O'Malley and Other Stories* which was the first collection of leather fiction and drama from *Drummer*.

The serial novel *Mr. Benson* that John Preston wrote under the pseudonym "Jack Prescott" in 1979 for *Drummer* also jumped to book form under the name "John Preston" four years later in 1983. In 1978, Embry had decided to move into book publishing with my *Drummer* serial novel, *Leather Blues*, written in 1969 and published in a limited edition in 1972. I wanted a written contract detailing rights and royalties, but I declined even that because Embry's failure to pay me my full monthly salary told me his contracts were not worth the paper they were written on. That did not stop the presumptuous Embry from announcing in *Son of Drummer* his publication of *Leather Blues* as a forthcoming "*Drummer* novel."

How *Mr. Benson* became a book was another story. Preston admitted it was the first fiction he ever wrote and that he wrote it "as a laugh." He told me he thought it was a comedy. When Embry took it seriously and I serialized it to *Drummer* specifications, Preston pressed on. Banking on Embry's low-grade lust for him, Preston was, like Sondheim's sloe-eyed vamp in

Follies, as provocative as he needed to be to have this serial become his first published book. When he arrived, hiding behind the mask of one of his seven or so pen names, he seemed depressed and bitter after having been fired as editor of *The Advocate*. He was not the first dumped *Advocate* employee to head straight for *Drummer*. He followed in the footsteps of other *Advocate* refugees such as first *Drummer* editor-in-chief Jeanne Barney and early columnist Aristede Laurent. The East Coast Preston of 1979 imitated the East Coast Mapplethorpe of 1977. Just as the virtually unknown Robert, seeking leather fame, arrived at my desk at *Drummer* with his portfolio and his hat in hand, Preston needed the power of *Drummer* to help rebuild his self-esteem and to kick-start his sadomasochistic writing career. So he ran the gauntlet to climb between the covers at Embry's Alternate Publishing.

A man's reach should exceed his grasp, but Preston's ambition exceeded his erotic talent. In the mid-1980s he became an intriguing editor of books who opportunely found social power in anthologizing authors grateful to be published at the height of the AIDS crisis, but he hadn't the gift of editing magazines.

Having lost face when he lost his position at *The Advocate*, he never became what he was desperate to become in the early 1980s: the editor of *Drummer* magazine.

His own nemesis, the ruthless John Rowberry, who became editor after my exit, kept his foot on Preston's neck.

Drummer had a palpable power and magic. When its contents were managed synergistically, the magazine was a rich source for growing features and fiction into books because book publishers found a certain trial-balloon confidence in the pre-sold "pitch" made by such magazine publication to an eager core audience of fans reading the 42,000 copies of *Drummer* published monthly in the late 1970s.

Knights Press also grew out of *Drummer* in terms of staff, authors, and books. Even *Advocate* journalist Craig Rowland took note, writing a perky feature about its founder Elizabeth Gershman titled "Betty's Books" in issue 517, January 3, 1989, page 56. A year later, Elizabeth published *Some Dance to Remember* on St. Valentine's Day, February 14, 1990. With Knights Press' three printings, that first edition sold over forty thousand copies and was a Lambda Literary Award finalist as best book, "Gay Men's Small Press" category, the third year of the Lammy competition. It placed as a Finalist in that contest, staged by the East Coast bookstore Lambda Rising, when three of its four fellow Finalists were books published by the Boston corporation, Alyson Publications, which was bought by *The Advocate* in 1995. While *Some Dance* finished tied with Robert Chesley's *Hard Plays/Stiff Parts*

(Alamo Square), it was surrounded by Stuart Timmons' *The Trouble with Harry Hay* (Alyson) and Kate Dyer's *Gays In Uniform* (Alyson). The winner was Michael Willhoite's controversial thirty-page children's book *Daddy's Roommate* (Alyson). Unfortunately, Knights Press, while quarreling with Sasha Alyson and Tim Barrus, suddenly went out of business for reasons ranging from gay heterophobia against Elizabeth Gershman to money to marriage.

In the scenario at the American Booksellers Association (ABA) convention in Las Vegas, 1990, Elizabeth Gershman told Mark Hemry and me that Sasha Alyson, allegedly, was "leaning on" her who opined to us that Sasha Alyson was gouging her for "gay protection money." I respect Alyson's gaystream reputation as a genius of corporate business and a social saint who spent his later years teaching literacy in Laos. So I am recounting only one encounter with him, perhaps atypical, which no doubt has several *Rashomon* points of view: Sasha's, Elizabeth's, Mark's, and mine. This incident shows no more than the colorful workings of raw capitalism courting art to turn it into profitable product. My testimony based on what I observed is mixed with allegations told me by other eyewitnesses. The Sasha Alyson of that time and place, Elizabeth alleged, asked for money from her, but she indignantly refused to pay to join his exclusive "LGBT Book Aisle" at the ABA. She figured Alyson resented her small press as competition outside his control. She claimed she told him in private to go to hell when she perceived he became sniffy—so she alleged—that a straight businesswoman was publishing gay books independently from the gay mainstream, and was refusing to take direction from him. So she said.

In my Impressionist memory from that time where I was already observantly writing this memoir of gay history, I can recall the drama of recriminations, allegations, and confusions. Sasha Alyson seemed colorful—from his gender-ambiguous moniker to his childlike Teddy Bear, apparently referencing Lord Sebastian Flyte in *Brideshead Revisited*. Perhaps to disarm authors suspicious of corporate publishers, he carried that Teddy Bear, which Flyte had named "Aloysius," in the crook of his arm. The Valley Girl saying of the day was, "Gag me with a spoon." The sick Ick of that stuffed Teddy signaled Alyson a bit precious at the height of the 1980s-1990s gender war that attacked fair-minded gay masculine identity of the kind I asserted in *Drummer* and dramatized in *Some Dance*. If East Coast publisher Alyson had known that West Coast publisher Richard Bulger had four years earlier already reinvented the Teddy Bear as a homomale mascot when he founded *Bear* magazine, he might have tossed his tiny Teddy in the toilet.

Shades of publisher Embry, Alyson, who had taken quondam *Drummer* author John Preston into his publishing house, pulled me aside for a tete-a-tete lecture. Hectoring me to join his book row, he seemed intent on turning me against Elizabeth who did not want her product, my book, to be in what she called Alyson's ghetto-side aisle. "Gay Alley, Son" was the joke. Not wanting to be marginalized in Alyson's gated community, Elizabeth had paid for Knights Press to host its own booth out on the wide-open floor with other mainstream, new age, and feminist small presses. As a result, Sasha Alyson—whom I met only that once—seemed a participant in the stealth feuds of the kind favored by Embry, as well as the kinds started in the 1980s by the self-anointed New York literary establishment against West Coast writers such as Larry Townsend, and even John Rechy and Armistead Maupin who both eventually got a nod because of their mainstream popularity (fans) and sales (cash) which earned a begrudged inclusion in the gay canon guarded by a three-faced Cerberus of two-faced Manhattan literary mandarins.

Some of those most famous gay authors, seven years later in January 1997, were chased off the stage of the San Carlos Institute at the annual Key West Writers Conference, "Literature in the Age of AIDS," because of the outrageous behavior of the screaming Larry Kramer, and other panelists being too sexually graphic, and others trashing fellow panelists, including the straight writer Ann Beattie for her not writing more about AIDS. The Key West president of the Conference, fed up, ran up on stage and—cutting entitled and rude queens down to size—told everyone on that stage and in the audience to get out. "The conference is over."

No matter how dramatic the spoiled tantrums of even the "greatest" gay writers, respect cannot be demanded. Ask Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote, and James Baldwin. To straight people, gay authors, from porn novelists to Pulitzer winners, are little more than genre writers penning guilty pleasures like romance novelists, sci-fi cult authors, or formula mystery hacks. Our segregation from mainstream American literature is perhaps one cause of the bitter intramural civil war among status-conscious gay American writers and publishers who work their anger out bullying each other.

That scandalous January afternoon in Key West all of us invited to leave, guilty or not, included alpha authors and agents such as Michael Bronski, David Leavitt, Jewelle Gomez, and Michael Denny who made way to the exits while an even-tempered Tony Kushner surveyed the embarrassing exodus.

Standing in the fourth row where we had been sitting, Mark Hemry and I were loving the slapstick Commedia dell'Arte of witnessing high-button

queens thwacked with pig bladders. Suddenly we saw the stunned and sweating keynote speaker Edmund White, who is younger than I, wobble down the stage steps toward the empty seats around us. He was having the vapors, flushed, feigning, and fanning himself as melodramatically as a Southern Belle with his manuscript pages.

“Is it hot in here?” He gasped, sweating calories. “Has someone used up all the oxygen?”

We took the pudgy pink hand he fluttered at us, as if we were groupies, so we could lean into a close-up shot of him playing the Great Man. We reassured him. An hour later at a very private garden party under whispering palms, White’s pit crew had re-inflated his ego, and enthroned him in a white rattan chaise from which he reigned imperiously, staring into mid-distance, making fanning gestures tinier than the Queen Mum waving from a golden landau. My better angels kept me from telling Eddie what Robert Mapplethorpe and Elizabeth Gershman thought of him.

In 1989, a year before the ABA, Elizabeth Gershman confessed to me—who had advised her to be careful about rivalries—that she had written a friendly letter to White requesting his generosity in throwing a bit of support to her fledgling Knights Press by writing a pre-publication quote for a couple of books including *Some Dance*. He begged off in a one-sentence postcard. Hurt by what she called condescension, she was in no mood to deal with another “gay godfather” like Alyson whom she alleged was blackballing Knights Press the way the literary Mafia refused to deal with her or her books. The one exception was Boston culture critic Michael Bronski who, contradicting White, supported her books like my *Some Dance* with perceptive and positive reviews.

Michael Bronski wrote in *The Guide*, Boston, July 1990:

Jack Fritscher’s mammoth chronicle of Castro Street, *Some Dance to Remember*, is, at heart, an historical epic: a tale of heroes struggling against not only one another, but fate and history as well. That his protagonists are leathermen, musclemen, and pornographers whose battles are against hate, repression, and AIDS only heightens the book’s sweeping epic stature. Like the huge, hyper-masculine stone figure that graces Fritscher’s cover, the characters loom large both on the page and in their own lives. At the center of *Some Dance to Remember* is the romance of Ryan O’Hara, topman/porn-scribbler/erotic philosopher/ex-seminarian, and Kick Sorenson, a blond bodybuilder who gets higher on pumping up than on any of the drugs he and Ryan take to enhance their musclesex. Focusing on

Ryan and Kick allows Fritscher to tell his real story which is the rise and decline—not really the fall—of the golden age of Castro and Folsom Street 1970-1982. There are scores of minor characters, hundreds of episodes, thousands of historical details and a plot that makes *Gone With The Wind* seem like a short story.

Some Dance to Remember is a great ambitious work and a rarity in modern fiction: a novel of ideas. (In fact, it has so many ideas that, at times, even its author seems overwhelmed by them.) Fritscher is concerned not only about telling the truth of gay men's lives—how we lived and loved, struggled and survived—but in examining in the psychological and philosophical underpinnings of those lives—the intricate interplay of self-expression and self-destruction, of sexual autonomy and erotic dependency. But more importantly, he has recreated more than a decade of gay history—its sights, smells, nerves, and guts. If *Some Dance to Remember* both astonishes and bewilders, seduces and frightens us (often at the same time) it is because Fritscher has captured, with intelligence and love, the way we live, both then and now.

Alyson's attitude made him seem very like Embry with his Blacklist. Alyson perhaps disliked the challenge presented by the strong-willed Elizabeth long before he met me, and, even while he was evangelizing me for our fifteen minutes together, I said nothing to him that was divisive or offensive. I had respect for what I knew about his decade of pioneering work as founder of Alyson Press, but in our conversation I could tell he knew nothing of my thirty years in publishing, my dozen years in teaching writing at university, my five already published books (two gay, three straight), and my three years editing *Drummer*. I had just turned fifty years old. I was an old hand. He could not top me as he might his usual desperate young authors who would do anything to get published. As a gay business mogul recruiting talent, he had not done his homework.

He did, however, presume I had some control over financiers Elizabeth Gershman and her husband who were both connected, not to the Mafia, so much as they were to the power of the Kennedy family. Within a year, their daughter married Teddy Kennedy, Jr. Having grandchildren surnamed Kennedy stationed them higher in the family, Elizabeth bragged, than other in-laws whose Kennedy grandchildren carried surnames other than Kennedy, such as Shriver, or, worse, Schwarzenegger.

It was amusing at the ABA to eyewitness Sasha Alyson take on the very gay-friendly Gershmans whose business goal, more niche than his, was to

keep gay male-identified literature from the margins of genre, niche, and ghetto. Frankly, I did not want my fourth book populating Alyson's gay aisle because *Some Dance to Remember*, with its comic relief of straight characters, was a San Francisco book as much as it was a gay book. I liked Elizabeth's maneuver to present my literature equally with straight books out on the main floor. Fans of gender-fucking, if not scholars of gender studies, may assay that Elizabeth and I seemed to be doing the liberated crossover thing for the "gay male gender" in an age when galloping feminist separatists and politically correct fundamentalists were highjacking gay publishing with no compunction about punishing masculine gay men for the perceived wrongs that straight males had done them in high school.

Additionally, our Knights Press booth had a video monitor screening a twenty-minute loop of Folsom Fair footage that Mark Hemry and I had shot, edited, and produced to present *Some Dance* while, behind the images, I read from passages from the book in a voice-over. Ours was a forward-thinking display that one-upped Alyson's sideshow that had no mixed media. Indeed, if the Knights Press booth had not been out on the main floor, publishers from the straight Hastings House in New York would never have stopped by to chat, and, finding out about my relationship to the recently deceased Robert Mapplethorpe, and seeing my obituary for him in *Drummer*, would never have offered me a contract to write my pop-culture memoir *Mapplethorpe: Assault with a Deadly Camera*. The fact of an uppity West Coast author writing about a Manhattan photographer (presumably the property of Big Apple authors) chuffed the East Coast circle-jerk of New York writers blurbing, reviewing, and rewarding each other with literary prizes. Social class structure may be muted in the United States, but class and gender and race bullying is the soul of gay culture, and gay publishing is its high-school locker room.

In 1995, nine years after Embry sold *Drummer* to Anthony DeBlase, Alyson sold his Alyson Publications to Liberation Publications, owner of the man-hating *Advocate*. It was a perfect fit of queens who deserved each other. The merger proved John Embry correct in his disdain for the politically correct *Advocate* chauvinists. With the power of its press propaganda, it was David Goodstein's *Advocate* with his Werner Erhard est-driven "Advocate Experience" that eroded the social cohesion that had existed for a moment in the 1970s among all the genders of being gay. To me, it seemed a tragedy that we had lost our Stonewall Moment. The divisive cultural Marxism of the effeminist-dominated media, proclaiming multi-cultural diversity, was neither universal nor intramural. It was not meant for men self-identified as masculine. The effeminati culture defining themselves as victims, rejected

masculine identity as the oppressive “other.” *Drummer* by comparison grew its core readership by planting the gay pride flag of homomascularity—even while evolving to include all the genders of leatherfolk. *Drummer* began with a female editor, Jeanne Barney, and ended with a female editor, Wickie Stamps.

Among the Las Vegas slot machines, a parallel drama unfolded on the floor of the ABA mobbed with thousands of book buyers. Elizabeth’s husband, Jim Gershman, was already angry at what looked like Sasha Alyson’s scheme. It was gay insult to straight injury when a Knights Press writer, T. R. Witomski, a *Drummer* author, and a friend of Tim Barrus and me, walked up unannounced to the Knights Press booth and launched his ambush attack on the Gershmans. One of those “radical” guys from New Jersey who think that “causing a scene” is essential to rebellious homohood, Witomski was a tall man who towered over the crowd. Wound up, he began screaming at the top of his lungs about his contract and the royalties he was owed for his book *Kvetch*. Erotic filmmaker Witomski had no bourgeois boundaries when shooting his surreal BDSM sex features with mud, raw eggs, and Daiquiri douches for his cophrophagic Katsam Video Company that made John Waters’ *Pink Flamingos* seem like Disney. He certainly had no boundaries in his performance art that afternoon. He hated the Gershmans.

Terminal with AIDS, he went mad ranting at the Knights Press booth with thousands of conventioners milling around us. His heterophobic gay tantrum, denouncing the gay-straight alliance attempted by Knights Press, embarrassed Mark Hemry and me. We were two guys, partners, happy with my new novel and high on our author gig, standing at the booth chatting with the legendary Hollywood actress, Ann Miller, MGM’s star dancer, who had stopped by out of curiosity, asking, “What kind of dancing is *Some Dance* about?” She was one of the big celebrities at the ABA publicizing her own forthcoming New Age book *Tapping into the Force*. Dear Annie, all eyelashes, red lipstick, and sleeked black hair. She was the 1940s star with the legs my father adored. Standing with us, obviously mortified, watching Witomski explode, she took the hands of both Mark and me and said, “Darlings, don’t be embarrassed. I see this all the time.” And with an air kiss to each of us, she and her publicist walked on.

Within months, Knights Press closed its business because Elizabeth Gershman—who could blame her?—turned her attention from the politics and stress of gay publishing to her daughter who was marrying Teddy Kennedy, Jr. For his part, Tim Barrus never forgave Elizabeth for killing her infant company that Barrus had worked so hard to establish. For my part, I can’t forget that Gershman exited owing me \$12,000.

Tim Barrus, endearing for writing outrageous letters, sent me and others reams of open-letter correspondence about the injustices done him by the Gershman and about the state of gay publishing. In his writing, the former *Drummer* editor accused Elizabeth of sexual harassment while he worked at Knights Press. His frankness as an author writing honestly about publishers Gershman and Embry could seem absurdist and preposterous, but only to the inexperienced. I believed him about both persons.

In fact, even though she was a dozen years older than I, Elizabeth did, swear to God, come on to me the last night of the ABA. Her husband had left Vegas, and Mark had flown back to his career in San Francisco in the afternoon, leaving me alone with Elizabeth in the two-bedroom condo we four had shared for the convention. That evening in a kind of French farce of slamming doors, Elizabeth treated me like I was straight. Shocked, because I adored her as a person, I told her, “Very funny, I’m gay. I’m a virgin. With women, I’m a virgin.” That only made the sexual tension worse. I wasn’t going to lose my cherry to a granny. Trying to joke my way back to friendship, I said, “Are you trying to seduce me, Mrs. Robinson?” Finally, I, a fifty-year-old gay man, retreated to my bedroom, and closed the door which she opened, and which I closed, several times, until I pushed a chest of drawers against the door to keep her out. It was hilarious. In the morning, over coffee and croissants, we were all smiles as if the farce had never happened.

I took Elizabeth’s ardor as a compliment, but her pursuit I found to be a disrespectful challenge of my essential homosexual identity as well as a dismissal of my then ten-year monogamous marriage to Mark. In chasing gay men, some straight women act out the magical thinking of a certain female hubris that they can change gay men. Such feminist “gay reparative therapy” is as presumptuous as Jane Austen’s first two sentences of *Pride and Prejudice* that press men into a stereotype.

“It is a truth,” Austen wrote, “universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife. However little known the [straight or gay] feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of *their daughters*.” [italics added]

Or, if Jane had ever traveled farther than thirty miles from her home, where life was gay, *their sons*.

The retort to Austen’s predatory sexism of owning men as “rightful property” is that the women hunting these men are gold-diggers. But that, even muttered sotto voce, is a heresy that dare not speak its name.

T. R. Witomski, the director of *Barber College* and *Mess*, gave up the ghost in 1992, but provocateur Tim Barrus never let up on their mutual nemesis, John Embry, who, later as publisher of *Manifest Reader*, remained to Barrus the same villain who had screwed up thirty years of gay publishing in *Drummer*.

The shape-shifting Barrus whom I helped journalist Andrew Chaikivsky profile in his feature, "Nasdijj," in *Esquire*, May 2006, was never one to let those who screw him escape. Retorting Barrus, John Embry in *Manifest Reader* 17 (1992), played coy with Barrus's reputation which he tried to destroy when he published a feature by the pseudonymous Vee Kay (sloppily billed as "Kay Vee" on the contents page). The exercise in scorn was titled "Portrait of a Wild Thing: Interview with Tim Barrus, the *Enfant Terrible* of Gay Publishing," pages 41-46.

At that moment, *Drummer* and its identity had once again been tossed in the air like a dog toy because the innately American magazine, spun out of the quintessence of the Marlboro Man cowboy, had just been sold on May 19, 1992, to its third publisher, the Dutch businessman Martijn Bakker whose corporate ownership in Holland plus his amateur editors in San Francisco finally killed everything that was grass-roots leathersex in *Drummer*. Over seven agonizing years, Bakker drained *Drummer* of its American sex appeal and identity, and stuffed it with sex photos from corporate video companies aping real leather action until he ceased publication with issue 214 in 1999. Embry danced on *Drummer's* grave, eulogizing 1970s *Drummer* (issues one to thirty) as the Golden Age of *Drummer*. Vee Kay's sarcastic interview, "Portrait of a Wild Thing," was calculated to justify Embry's onward-marching Blacklist. Plowing through Roget's *Thesaurus* to damn Barrus with faint praise, Embry/Vee Kay's poison pen set about spinning the truth about the delightfully controversial Barrus into insults and lies that only made Barrus more colorful. Vee Kay wrote:

This was an almost impossible interview to get. Tracking Tim Barrus down takes the skills of a detective...this most elusive and difficult of writers. Getting Barrus to sit down long enough to verbally organize his thoughts...takes the skills of a psychiatrist and a travel agent. Contrary to current literary opinion, Tim Barrus is neither crazy or institutionalized. He is volcanic, lucid, vehement, arrogant, seductive, childish, vulnerable, serious, unforgiving, and one of the most impassioned writers of words alive. There is perhaps no other writer quite like Tim Barrus in the small, idiosyncratic world of gay publishing. Barrus is disliked in the inner circles of

gay publishing like no other writer past present, gay or straight or in-between.

Embry insured that Vee Kay's interview skewered Barrus with phrases such as:

...foam at the mouth...bossy, bitchy, and markedly bizarre... hardly an editor or a publisher who hasn't been pissed off royally...a talent for enraging his public, his critics, his friends, his ex-friends (which are numerous), his ex-lovers (which are numerous), and his ex-wives (which are numerous)...insanely charging up twenty paths in twenty different directions....In 1988, Barrus became (for a time) the Associate Editor of *Drummer* magazine (which had published his fiction more extensively than any other publication, the first Barrus piece in *Drummer* being titled "Oh, Shit." A year later, Knights Press published *Genocide: The Anthology*, truly a sci-fi nightmare if ever there was one. Barrus left *Drummer* to become a consulting editor at Knights Press where he worked on such book projects as Robert Patrick's *Temple Slave*, Jack Fritscher's *Some Dance to Remember*, and Jeff [incorrect spelling of "Geoff"] Mains' last book *Gentle Warriors*. Barrus' brainchild LeatherLit, a proposed line of above-average books that would be aimed at the leather community (a market Barrus feels has been totally ignored) never got off the ground....Barrus left Knights Press in a turmoil of lawsuits, mega-angst, and literary barbs that flew between other writers in publications from one coast [East] to the other [West].

Vee Kay's very aggressive first questions to Barrus were about his hair style (his trademark Mohawk) and his age: "Your writing makes you sound older than you are." The third question was: "You are frequently charged with being psychotic and homophobic." Instead of punching Vee Kay and ending the interview, Barrus, wiley as a fox, managed to overpower Vee Kay and capture what he wanted: column inches in his arch-rival Embry's rag.

Undeterred by invective, Barrus revealed his own eyewitness "take" on the quality of 1970s *Drummer* when I was the editor-in-chief. He then went on to trash what *Drummer* became under Embry and Anthony DeBlase during both the politically correct revolution of the 1980s and the AIDS quake that sucked the eros out of homosexuality. His insider's literary opinion about *Drummer* history is valuable and accurate—and directed to Edmund White and his kind.

People ask me what my favorite short story is—one that I wrote; published in what else? *Drummer*. It's called "A Measure of Waste."... Pornography has become [1992] very demure. Almost ladylike....I hear gay men talk about bonding constantly. Blah, blah, blah—words. Bullshit in the wind...the more you talk about it the less it happens. Pornography used to be a way I could create alternative realities versus the realities that are imposed upon us....

In the beginning [late 1970s], *Drummer* had an edge. A real serious bite. It was about ideas and those ideas had to do with sexual images that had not really been put out there before. [Editor's note: Fritscher's "Cigar Blues" in *Drummer* 22, May 1978, was the first erotic article on cigars in the gay press and it was that feature that popularized the now evergreen homomasculine cigar style for daddies, musclemen, and bears.] *Drummer* wasn't slick. And no one else was doing what those folks were doing. It was extremely creative. It was magic. [Editor's note: During this period when Barrus wrote the word *Fritscher*, Embry with his Blacklist, creating synonyms, replacing *Fritscher* with *folks*, would most often quite obviously edit out Fritscher's name from *Manifest Reader* and his other magazines.] Some people [Fritscher, Shapiro, Sparrow, Mapplethorpe] got burned in the process because it was a process of fire and brimstone. But *Drummer* had an identity. Today it's fat. It's old. [Two swipes at the weight and age of both past publisher Embry (age 66) and then current publisher DeBlase (age 50).] It has become a how-to manual [a change brought about by DeBlase because of politically correct demands for safe sex even in the art of fantasy BDSM fiction] and does not reach down into the imagination—the brain—which is an organ...that is bigger than your dick. *Drummer* should mess with your imagination. It used to. I used to jerk off and have normal, heterosexual, everyday fantasies [Barrus identified as straight] and then something from fucking, goddam *Drummer* would creep up on me and my dick and invade the whole orgasmic process. Which is why I loved *Drummer*.

The old [1970s] *Drummer* was not safe. *Drummer* was not sane. And sometimes *Drummer* was not about consensuality. It was not about how to tie a knot around someone's balls. It was about the tension and the sweat and the relationship that existed between the knot and the knotted and the balls and the room and the smell and the richness and the humanity and the absolute, far-reaching joy to be found in absolute, far-reaching submission and the absolute,

quiet satisfaction that comes from having learned real dominance. *Drummer* was redefining who we were with words, photographs, with ideas, with images, with metaphors, with flesh and blood. NONE OF IT had been done before. It was truly an exciting, alive, vibrant, flawed place.....I may not be gay but I understand how privileged I was to be published in the company of those men. It actually hurts to read the magazine today. [1980-1990s] *Drummer* takes no risks. And yet it whines constantly that the forces of repression....are everywhere....It no longer has that snarly fuck-you attitude. It's tired. It bitches....It reads like a clubby newsletter. A rich boys' clique. [The second *Drummer* owners DeBlase and Andrew Charles were, like real-estate mogul Embry with his mink-dragging Mario Simon, ostentatiously rich.] It is no longer unique. It has become like the rest of gay sex...totally meaningless....*Drummer* was starting to make me throw up when I read it and I was the one [as editor!] responsible for what was being published....There I was a whore and an editor. I was giving them what they wanted and it was all my fault. Blame the editors. [For the bad, and credit them for the good] Which is why so much of gay publishing is so fucking colorless and impotent. Gay publishing should be more like rock-and-roll and less like Edmund Fucking White.

Two years later, in August 1994, Barrus, exercising his right to rebut Embry's lies, excoriated Embry in another "open letter" addressed to "Dear John." The gorgeously shameless Barrus mailed multiple copies of this letter, tossing pages from the open cockpit of his biplane strafing Gay Metropolis. Never embarrassed even by Barrus, Embry, who sucked up free column inches anywhere he could to fill his pages, published most of Barrus' open letter in his column, "Roses and Brickbats from All Over," in *Manifest Reader* (October 1994), pages 5 and 15. Embry liked getting a rise out of Barrus whom he provoked, as he had also manhandled Jeanne Barney, in order to inject controversy and gossip into his magazines. He had severely trashed, slandered, and shamed Barney as early as *Drummer* 30 (June 1979). As editor-in-chief of that issue, I was an eyewitness to the war. It's not my opinion about Embry attacking allies. It's fact. Embry liked the vigor of fighting in print.

Embry Blacklists Jeanne Barney in Print
Drummer 30 (June 1979)

Affecting the legalese patois written by people who are not lawyers, Embry revealed his snide LA attitude, sexism, heterophobia, jealousy, and revisionism about the woman who was his valued Los Angeles editor-in-chief who stood together with him founding and filling the first eleven issues of *Drummer* (1975-1976) until she quit because of the growing notoriety of Embry's business practices and his failure to pay her salary. His libelous sarcasm turned his heroine "Jeanne" into his villain "Mrs. Barney." At Embry's *Drummer*, no worker was safe from the Blacklist.

* * * *

NOTICE! Mrs. Jeanne Chelsey Barney, aka "Barney" and "J. Barney" is representing herself as the owner of the LEATHER FRATERNITY [started by Embry] and is operating out of a mail box drop in La Crescenta, California. She has solicited memberships in this "Fraternity," promising subscriptions to DRUMMER magazine as part of its benefits. Later, after being cut off by DRUMMER and two of its distributors for nonpayment, she is substituting a multilithed "Newsletter," promised monthly and containing offers of merchandise in the "FRATERNITY's" name, membership pitches and solicitation of contributions as well as scurrilous attacks on ALTERNATE PUBLISHING [the actual name of Embry's business running *Drummer*] and its people.

Notice is hereby given that THE LEATHER FRATERNITY is a fully protected name since 1973 and has no connection whatever with Mrs. Barney's effort. THE LEATHER FRATERNITY does not sell merchandise, nor does it accept nor solicit donations. It does not publish names of members as Mrs. Barney has unfortunately done.

Mrs. Barney is offering remnants of her unpaid-for DRUMMER inventory at inflated prices and offering subscriptions to DRUMMER at \$3.50 per issue. DRUMMER has no subscription agents and cannot honor any such obligation. Up until December 31, 1978, DRUMMER made good the FRATERNITY membership subscriptions that had been sold in DRUMMER's name via Mrs. Barney. Henceforth any monies sent to Mrs. Barney cannot be the responsibility of ALTERNATE PUBLISHING. We would appreciate being notified of any checks to DRUMMER or ALTERNATE PUBLISHING endorsed and negotiated by anyone other than this company. —*Drummer* 30, June 1979, page 38.

Tim Barrus, the author of the books, *Mineshaft*, *Genocide*, and *The Boy and the Dog Are Sleeping*, wrote to Embry in 1994:

...What, *moi* engage in sarcasm?...It's too bad we [Embry and Barrus] never connected....Together we could have given the publishing *status quo* a run for its money. But no. Such heresy gives you, the gay bitch queen, hives. We could have done some truly innovative things together....At least when you created *Drummer* you were hands on with it (some of it had to have been created on your kitchen table)....I wonder how someone in your position could have gone through the outstanding minds and the talents you have known (and used) without really knowing the people (and the talents) that were necessary to support the many projects you have created. Names like John Preston, T. R. Witomski..., Steven Saylor, even Rowberry (you never really knew Rowberry or you would have exploited him far more effectively than you did). *Sometimes I wonder if you even once...had an inkling as to the talent...assembled... I would note...over the years how you were surrounding yourself with more and more really meager talents. You seemed far more comfortable with this than the times when you found yourself surrounded (besieged?) by powerhouses....* [Italics added] For a long time you were cutting edge. But now you are content to be history...Which leads me to think that your association with rebels in all of this was an accident and not something you consciously set out to put together...While the more itchy talents (such as Fritscher) went their own (often odd) way, it might amuse you to know that Robert Mapplethorpe and I (while in the middle of our torrid New York affair) [Mapplethorpe never mentioned to me any affair with Barrus, but then Robert kept all his friends separate —JF] used to discuss you for hours and wonder, really what the hell you were like....You were everything from Machiavelli to Maria Callas....I would suggest that you stick to selling real estate [that phrase, *real estate*, crops up in the testimony of several eyewitnesses who knew that *Drummer* profits financed Embry's property empire] and get out of gay publishing.

Embry, equally sarcastic, responded in the same *Manifest Reader* (October 1994, pages 5 and 15):

Mr. Barrus desperately wants to be disliked, that is his shtick. We find him amusing, even likeable, if annoying, sometimes. However,

with such a small present-day staff, and the abundance of calamities that have befallen us recently there has been little time to...communicate with our contributors the way we would like.....We felt we should [publish this letter]. It is certainly not to ridicule Mr. Barrus, whose abilities we often admire.

In his own patronizing and dismissive words in this quote, Embry gave evidence of his emotional problems that ruined him as a businessman.

He always seemed attracted and repulsed by Barrus and by most other contributors in the village it took to create an issue of *Drummer*. He was attracted because he needed writers, artists, and photographers to fill his magazine. He was repulsed because they made creative demands and argued to be paid. Mostly, he was jealous that many of his contributors were more gifted than he, the publisher, whom they made look good. He wanted to be “Mr. Drummer,” but he wasn’t loved. He wanted to be one of us boys in the *Drummer* Salon creating the magazine, but even as publisher, he managed to cause his own ostracization.

So he played a tiny thumb-and-forefinger violin, singing his sad story as a publisher-saint, beset with calamity, who can’t keep up with “correspondence”—which meant “payment”—to his contributors. The cynical Embry lied when he wrote that he did not wish to “ridicule” Barrus who topped his Blacklist.

Embry’s sadist heart liked ridiculing people. His masochist heart loved being ridiculed. He got a cheap thrill publishing readers’ letters bitching about him and the trickster way he did business. By issue eleven, Barney said, he had earned the nickname “Robert Ripoff” in publishing and mail order.

On December 11, 2008, Tim Barrus wrote to me:

John Embry always sucked. He made an accounting error once and sent me several checks for the same article. Then he saw his error and screamed blood he wanted his money back. I was in Key West at that time. I cashed every check. Fuck him.

Embry, as a business man, had a loud stentorian voice in print. The power of the press belongs to him who has one, and Embry had platforms. From the early 1970s to his death in 2010, he owned nearly a dozen magazines such as *Mach*, *The Alternate*, *Manifest Reader*, and *Super MR*. He was miles wide, but only an inch deep.

When he asked me in 1978 to help him create *Mach* as a *Drummer*

sibling, was I the only one who thought *Mach* was short for *Machiavelli*?

Drummer, however, could have thrived better as an only child who did not have to support other magazines. In the 1970s, *Drummer* was so strong a brand name that it helped create the very leather culture it reported on.

After that powerful Golden Age of sexual entertainment, Embry used his later magazines as power tools to settle scores, revise history, and romance his own legend.

Too often his thirty-years of prevarications and mistakes are quoted by legitimate journalists, historians, and anthropologists as if they are true.

Critical thinking is required. Fact-checking is necessary. Turn to the texts inside *Drummer* and other Embry publications for internal evidence to examine his character and agenda, including his plagiarisms, feuds, and ads for pedophiles and the Nazi party.

Embry's tallish tales only survive *postmortem* when his revisionism is made "true" simply by being repeated by incurious bloggers and ingenuous researchers and innocent historians who, not knowing the *dybbuk* they are dancing with, fail to realize they are "accessories after the fact" in resurrecting and perpetuating Embry's crime of injecting his disinformation into the leatherstream.

Even DeBlase, who loathed Embry, could be tricked.

Immediately after paying Embry thousands of dollars to buy *Drummer*, DeBlase tried to write up a fair-handed *Drummer* history in the landmark *Drummer* 100. But minus critical thinking about, and fact-checking of, Embry's slanted innuendo and lies published in previous issues of *Drummer*, he fell into the booby trap Embry had set, and reprocessed and reprinted some of Embry's bombast chapter and verse.

Unfortunately, his uncritical repetition of Embry's fibs and falsehoods damaged his editorial in *Drummer* 100, as well as some of the informational entries DeBlase later made in the first uncorrected draft of his ambitious "Leather Timeline" which the fact-checkers at the Leather Archives & Museum in Chicago will spend years correcting.

DeBlase was not shy about pegging Embry as a shady character who had defrauded him by lying about hidden financial liabilities when he bought *Drummer*. Intellectually, DeBlase with his doctorate might have safeguarded himself better. He was an eyewitness who knew from his own experience that after he bought *Drummer*, Embry made a hobby of trashing DeBlase and *Drummer* while constantly revising the real history of the magazine's talent base.

Embry was an unreliable and often unknowledgeable keeper of the institutional memories of *Drummer* which he owned for only eleven of its

twenty-four years. For the other thirteen years at *Drummer*, “Embry” was a dirty word.

Nevertheless, the Age of AIDS made him feel safe rewriting *Drummer* institutional “group history” into his personal hagiography. He figured few would bother to rebut him because most of his eyewitnesses were dead.

