

BEAR ROOTS VERITE
A PIONEER'S ORAL HISTORY
RON SURESHA INTERVIEWS JACK FRITSCHER

Ron Suresha: Jack, what was *Drummer* like when you started working there as editor-in-chief?

Jack Fritscher: *Drummer* first published in 1975 and, when I first came aboard officially in June 1977, it had struggled to publish about 14 issues. It was like a stillborn baby that wasn't breathing. Harold Cox, publisher of Checkmate magazine, *Drummer's* virtual successor, said that I slapped *Drummer* with an identity and made it cry, scream, shout, and kick.

In the early issues, I was involved first as a freelance writer and photographer, introducing my friends into *Drummer*: photographer Jim Stewart; artist Tom Hinde; my domestic lover and photography business partner, David Sparrow; my bicoastal lover, photographer Robert Mapplethorpe; my creative partner, video-artist David Hurler of Old Reliable fame. My friend, the wonderful Bear-pec artist A. Jay, the art director for *Drummer*, begged me to take the job. Suddenly, because of my years of journalism, magazine, and marketing experience, I became the founding *Drummer's* founding San Francisco editor.

Ron: What other work were you doing at the time?

Jack Fritscher: Always writing. I am a gonzo journalist after the New Journalism of writers like Tom Wolfe and George Plimpton in the '60s: you must participate in what you write about. That's very Hemingwayesque, but also the Way of the True Pop Culture Analyst. My fiction was first published in magazines when I was 19 in 1958. I wrote one of the first leather novels, *Leather Blues*, with two overtly Bearish characters, in 1972. In 1976, I began writing for Kaiser Engineers in the SF Bay Area and ran their Marketing and Proposals Departments. Before that, I was an Associate Professor with tenure at a university, so I am allowed to make cracks about academics. Actually pertinent here is the fact that in 1968 I was one of the founding members of the American Popular Culture Association, so I was prepared for the outbreak of gay culture after Stonewall in 1969.

Ron: Did you ever feel overqualified to be editing *Drummer*?

Jack Fritscher: No. Only the terminally vain, the lazy, and the untalented say they're overqualified. "Those who can't, teach, and those who can, do." I taught writing and journalism at university, and am fully credentialed to this day to teach university. But what could be better than being editor and chief writer of a new magazine in a new culture that is just discovering its identity? Put that last sentence in italics. Identity was exactly what I had in mind.

Ron: How did this "ursomascularity" (to improvise on your wonderful word "homomascularity") develop? Did you see it birthing itself upon *Drummer's* pages as well as the culture around you?

Jack Fritscher: What I'm going to tell you here is, in a sense, a personal history and not academic theory-query. This stuff happened to me or I helped it happen. I'm not taking a territorial piss on

this stuff, because you can't copyright a concept. The dates when someone actually first does something, however, are objective, and so by objectively examining materials in print - left behind like bear tracks in the woods - I can point to the who-what-where-when-and-how this "Bear" concept evolved.

I didn't invent leather or cigars or jockstraps or Bears, but I took those words as "concepts" and pulled them out of generic masculinity and fetishized them into homomascularity for gay men. While many gay men may have had an opinion about, or a secret turn-on to cigars, by my writing the first cigar fetish article in the gay press, suddenly there were "smoke signals." A measurable phenomenon began to appear in the gay bars right away and in the letters to the editor and the personals the next issue. A sociologist could see cause and effect happening.

Ron: So *Drummer* had its pulse on the crotch of homomasculine America.

Jack Fritscher: Everybody was reading *Drummer* because it was the only magazine for masculine-identified men. It was the third glossy-format magazine founded after Stonewall. The rest were like Blue Boy or Queen's Quarterly.

Ron: The others had very little news or editorial content.

Jack Fritscher: They were mostly pictures and jokes - sweater jokes, camp jokes, and men pretending they were girly, or doing that sort of self-hating satire of masculinity gay men were at the time prone to, actually referring to themselves as "friends of Dorothy." Basically, gay male self-hatred of the masculine animus comes from straight people's stereotype that gay men are not "real men," are "girly, effeminate," and maybe even, "a third sex."

This is why I like the concept of "Bear." And this is my original analysis and definition which you might put in italics for any reader skimming: Bear is a concept so receptively "blank" that as label it welcomes and absorbs all masculine fantasies, fetishes, identities, and body types. "Bear" is all-inclusive.

Ron: The Bear archetype is based on one of those themes that you extracted from the fabric of homomasculine life.

Jack Fritscher: It was. *Drummer* was a hot-center lightning rod of masculine-identified homosexuality trying to differentiate itself from the sweater sissiness of the stereotype that straight people always perceived gay men to be. Ultimately, Bears are a masculine retort to that kind of effeminate stereotype which people feel they can control like they think they can control women.

Recently, a very big Bear I know moved to Hubbud, Texas. He looks so much like every other guy at the Wal*Mart that he was perceived as straight. When he finally said, "Get over it! I'm gay," the straight folks in Hubbud said, "You can't be gay. You're too old, hairy, and fat," as if only the young, hairless, and wispy can be gay. That's the stereotype some straight people use to measure queers.

Ron: It's an all-pervasive misconception a gay masculinity. Can you identify in mainstream American culture then what happened so that finally homomasculine activity and attitude could be teased out from the - as you so succinctly coined it - the "gaystream"?

Jack Fritscher: In the immortal words of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, "Let's do the time-warp again." Time-travel back in pop culture. The gay men who came out in the Golden Age of Gay Liberation in the '70s all watched the same movies and TV as boys in the '50s and '60s. Adult gay men in the '70s all shared a common adolescence that affected their erotic psyches, fantasies, and ideals.

In tracing and mapping a Bear gene, I think the very DNA for the generation of gays who arrived at the concept of Bear emanates from the 1950s with movies like *Quo Vadis*, Steve Reeves, and "gladiator" movies. These images of men dramatized powerful men with bodies carved with muscle, or gigantic in size, with heroes bearded, and villains bearded and matted with body hair. In 1953, *Quo Vadis* was the most awaited movie of its day. All the strength of that movie was in the big-hearted gladiator named "Ursus." American boys became fascinated by the arena, nearly naked men, and gladiatorial combat. Fast-forward to Mr. America, Steve Reeves, in the late '50s, wearing a beard and fighting off other muscleguys hairier and beefier than the very refined Reeves himself. Those Hercules movies fed directly into the mixture comprising today's "musclebears."

At the same time on TV, boys were stunned week after week watching Bear prototype Clint Walker in "Cheyenne" (1955-63). The straight, hairy Walker developed his overt Bearishness in movies like *The Night of the Grizzly*. Those boys watching Walker for eight years became the first adult males after Stonewall in the '70s - so there's no wonder that Walker's "lumberjack" look was the basis of the "Castro Clone" look, which started out more "Clint" than "Clone."

The '60s ended innocence. The '70s, an age of liberation, introduced men as - thank God - sex objects in the centerfolds of magazines ostensibly for the pleasure of liberated women. Hee hee. *Cosmopolitan* and *Playgirl* featured some incredible hairy men, like Burt Reynolds, Joe Namath, and Russ Francis, the famous pro-football star who also wrestled.

So many pop-culture athletes figure here as well. To cite but one example, there's the *Cosmo* model, quarterback Terry Bradshaw, who has gained the proportions of a large-sized Bear: hairy, bald, and - to pop culture straight cheers - one of the sexiest men alive. In the '70s, Bradshaw was young, hairy, balding, and built, and featured as a hunk in women's magazines. That meant all of us men could be free with our bodies.

Male icons of the '70s, like those already mentioned, as well as Joe Namath, OJ Simpson, and Ted Turner, brought a wholesome sexiness to American masculinity, far unlike the '60s uptight John Wayne or Ronald Reagan or urbane Cary Grant. The '70s showed men sexy, rough, natural. Grooming no longer meant clipping, shaving, and cutting hair. Men's looks changed as drastically as sexual mores. Listen to the Top 10 theme song from the musical, *Hair*, glorifying hairiness forbidden by the crewcut U.S. army and the chest-shaving stars of Hollywood. Pop culture embraced liberation and revolution at the same time by de-puritanizing and celebrating the secondary sexual characteristics of the male. And that is the pop culture birth of Bear.

Bear celebrates the secondary sexual characteristics of the male: facial hair, body hair, proportional size, baldness - all those things that "Delilah wives" don't like because they want their "Samson husbands" to "cut their hair, get cleaned up, put on a tie, shave their back, shave their chest, get rid of all that nasty forearm hair with Nair, wear a toupee. . . ."

Ron: And graying hair as well. There were also Richard Amory's *Song of the Loon* books from the late '60s, which was made into a film as well, in 1970.

Jack Fritscher: Right, the video company called Adam & Company was the great inheritor of the ur-bearishness of the *Song of the Loon* film, which played repeatedly at the Nob Hill Theater, driving its long-haired images into San Francisco's erotic consciousness. The movie was about only one thing: masculine, romantic, hairy, hippie sex. Richard Amory, I know for a fact, hated the movie, because he thought it only about sex and not about his story and characters.

That, of course, collides into the '70s first gay films, directed by Wakefield Poole, which tilted from the blond and hair-free *Boys in the Sand* to the bearded, rough, hand-balling film, *Moving*. Poole was shooting nonactors from San Francisco bars and baths where, without hot secondary sex characteristics, like a beard, muscle, and pecs with nipples, a man was toast. Wakefield Poole's year-2000 autobiography takes its title *Dirty Poole* from my interview of him in *Drummer* #27, February 1978, which was the first serious journalist interview in the masculine-identified gay press.

Out of those secondary sexual characteristics came the cult of "real men." I don't mean "real men" in the sense that straights use the expression but in the sense of a "natural man." In the '70s, for the first time, you were allowed to be "natural" rather than "normal." That was before the PC [politically-correct] Puritans screwed up gay culture with their failed Marxism by trying to make us all behave according to their standards: come to consensus, hate anything male, say the word "issue" in every sentence, and sing "Kumbaya."

Bears have always been contrapuntal to that because Bears physically signify everything that the pussy-whipped PC norm is against. Think of Bear drawings in the wide range of Bear-themed magazines. How do Bear-artists draw Bears? The PC despise the white male in the trailer park with the gun. That redneck archetype, armed with gun and knife, gone hunting, is a major erotic symbol of Bear life. Most Bears would die to live in a mobile-home park with a gun and a "Hog" [a Harley-Davidson]. That kind of man can be as hairy, bikerish, and free as he wants. Isn't that the gay Bear magazine ideal?

All Bear stories - because Bear stories aren't usually very developed - don't really have much character, story arc, or dialogue. They are mostly this thumbnail: "I went out to a bar. I met this gigantic, mysterious biker/leatherman/cop Bear. He took me back to his trailer/cabin/truck, smoked cigars/spit/pissed/shit, fucked me silly, threw me out, and abandoned me - and I'll always remember him forever." That's the basic Bear-story formula. Actually, their pure distilled essence signals how desperately un-PC and unbourgeois and free Bears truly long to be. I'm surprised that there isn't any "legit" Bear literature on top of this kind of honest "folk" literature of Beardom.

Actually, I love that we're getting in our Bear mags a non-elitist honesty coming from people's fantasies, from the standard fantasy out there. Bears are gay people's "princes," who vocalize the song of the Bear for lost homomascularity. I've always thought that gay culture is best measured by the "classified personals," because in those expensive column inches, paying by the word, men express as short and sweet as possible exactly what they're looking for, dreaming of, idealizing, eroticizing. "Personals" are truth. The "personal" is the opposite of the "political."

Ron: I've noticed Bear ads developing over the years. Even the "Personals" of gay newsweeklies now have sections for "Bears and Cubs."

Jack Fritscher: You want the evolution of that? I listened to what was coming in from the readers. I studied the "Personals" ads and wrung out their essence into an ongoing *Drummer*

feature I invented called “Tough Customers.” I invited readers, for free, to send in photos of themselves and state what they kind of sex trip they wanted. Yikes! Revealing your face in a gay magazine in 1977 was unheard of after ages when a camera in a gay bar would have emptied it.

“Tough Customers” featured categories such as “Leather,” “Beast,” “Bull,” and “Pig.” High-concept “Bear” is part of the anthropomorphism of any primitive culture. Every tribe - every sports team, every club - wants to see itself in another animal. Just as America has the eagle and Russia has the bear, each state has its own animal. You can flip through gay magazines and see erotic changelings everywhere. Guys are animals, foxes, dogs, horse-hung. Bars are coded the Eagle, Half-breed, Stallion, Jaguar, Lion, Shaggy Horse. Men translate into werewolves.

Everybody loves a makeover. Bear is the ultimate, last-ditch makeover. Actually, high-concept “Bear” is just one of those transmogrifications of body-type description that reflects an animal that people relate to physically or psychologically: “a lion of a man,” “a real pig,” “a snake,” “a great big bear.” Turning men into furry, pet-able animals makes “safe” the naturally aggressive image of the male who looks scary to some people. Frequently, Palm Drive Video gets mail from people who say, “Take me off your free brochure list. Your leathermen look too scary for me.” But my Bears they're not scared of, because a Bear seems accessible, friendly, cuddly.

Ron: Right, because instead of having a leather skin, bears' outer surface, at least, is soft and furry, particularly if you look at how bears had already been by the turn-of-the-century anthropomorphized into the Teddy Bear.

Jack Fritscher: Oh, Teddy Roosevelt who should be a major bear icon as a presidential action figure.

Ron: But let's return to tracing the Bear lineage.

Jack Fritscher: Like Wakefield Poole, the Gage Brothers who followed him in the film trilogy, *Kansas City Trucking*, *El Paso Wrecking Company*, and *L.A. Tool and Die*, had the greatest homomale movie titles ever. In one of the early issues of *Drummer*, the first Daddy Bear, Richard Locke, called the famous leather-sadist Fred Halsted, a “real Teddy Bear” after they finished shooting *L.A. Tool and Die*. So, as early as 1977 you have one famous porn star calling another one a “teddy bear,” even though Fred Halsted's hypermasculinity no way denoted Bearishness.

Bears began to differentiate themselves for me with porn-star Richard Locke, who was the quintessence of warm, wonderful, and sexy and, before Bears per se existed, the perfect model for the coming Bear movement. In an interview in *Drummer*, my first question - hilarious now - to him was, “Now that you are 37, what do you think will happen to your porn-star career?” Richard had a touch of gray in his mustache then, and 37 in gay San-Francisco-years was old! Gay liberation, like all the revolutions of the '60s and '70s, was a youth culture. Because I was the same age as Richard Locke, I was pedaling fast to prepare for turning 40 myself.

In 1978, there was a film called *In Praise of Older Women*. What a great theme to inject in *Drummer*: “*In Praise of Older Men*.” Cope with the inevitable, I figured, because all the hot guys out on Folsom and Castro are going to be older eventually. I wondered, “What kind of

image can they grow gracefully into, what kind of light can I as an editor and writer beam into the end of this tunnel?" So I pumped (journalistically) Richard Locke into the sparkling new icon of a "Daddy," which begat "Daddy's Boy." With Locke's drop-dead good looks, personability, and performances in the Gage trilogy, the campaign made Locke legendary. As soon as that interview was published, men engaged in the national gay conversation suddenly felt better about turning 30 or 40 or 50. Men can be hot whatever decade they're in. Locke, along with Colt's "Ledermeister," Paul Garrior, were the first icons of "real men" in the homomale lifestyle that led to the Bear lifestyle. Ledermeister is the original-recipe mockup of the hairy gay Bear. Subtract the twinkies, clones, fluff, and drag - in the '70s, gay men came out who were purely about masculinity as an absolute, not as reciprocal to anything else. The movement rather respectfully, actually, left the twinkies, clones, and drags to their alternative lifestyle. Masculinity was the celebration of the day.

Such masculinity was Whitmanesque. Walt called such sweeping camaraderie a "he-festival." Theoretically, as well as practically, in the heat of passion, homosexuality, male or female, by linguistic definition doesn't erotically accommodate the other gender - no offense to either other gender.

Ron: You mean "Kinsey 6"-scale homosexuality, which is exclusively same-gender eros.

Jack Fritscher: Kinsey 6, Dance 10, Looks 3! As humans, socially, politically, theologically, psychologically, yes, there is accommodation, but (love women as I do) not by erotic definition. In Greek, homo means "the same": male homosexuality by its very definition means "men only." Female homosexuality means by definition "women only." We accommodate each other graciously in other inclusive ways because we are all human. Despite the male-bashing in recent American culture, men still have human respect for women and women have human respect for men.

When you get down to the nitty-gritty of this gender thing, though, it's genetically and psychologically wrong to ascribe soft feelings in men as "feminine" and hard feelings in women as "masculine." The genders have different chromosomes, XX and XY (and in the male prison population, XYY!), and they approach universal human emotion according to their biology, which is determined the same way that homosexuality is - probably, by a gene: 50% gene, 50% nurture.

Ron: There seems to be increasing evidence for that as well. But how does Bear masculinity differ from leather masculinity?

Jack Fritscher: Leather masculinity is more about ritual endurance late at night in torturous military, disciplined situations. While leatherbears can do that, vanilla Bears are more about domesticity and socializing. Leathermen socialize basically in leather-games: SM, BD, TT, FF, the whole alphabet soup of the leatherstream. But what specific "Bear-games" are there? Bears basically fuck and suck, and hug - most are looking for hugs.

Ron: So let's fast-forward in our written docudrama of "Bear verité."

Jack Fritscher: These mid-20th-century images of straight-media hunks translated into the most famous early Colt and Target Studio's Bear God model, Ledermeister. Lou Thomas was half of

Colt who split amicably into Target. I gave Lou Thomas some coordinate concepts like “Tokers and Takers,” guys who smoke cigarettes or joints or cigars and were Top; and “Bulls and Beef” and “Bulls and Bears.” (We can all thank photographer Jim French for his lifelong fidelity to Bears that gives us Colt's contemporary Platonic Ideal of the trim musclebear: Steve Kelso, Pete Kuzak, and Carl Hardwick.)

At the same time, Bearish artists like Lugar at Colt and Target, Rex in his Rexwerk, and Domino in New York showcased hairy men. Alongside those men and Chuck Arnett, who inked those Red Star Saloon primal drawings of Bears prowling after midnight, the South-of-Market artist who did the most for Bearish hair was, of course, A. Jay (Al Shapiro). A. Jay was the Ur-cartoonist in *Queen's Quarterly* and then in *Drummer* who did a nipple-and-fur comic strip called “The Super Adventures of Harry Chess.”

Then British artist, Bill Ward, with his handsome-as-Colt characters “Drum” and “King” in *Drummer* truly penned the emerging fantasy of the dominant musclebear. Cavello often drew hairy men, but his drawings - for all their WeHo [West Hollywood] S&M - are very pretty George Petty. The Hun is one American artist whose work has chased the popular taste for Bear. As Bears arose, the Hun's drawings showed men transmorphing out of lumberjack into Bear. Plus the Hun dramatizes black men as Bears the way Domino goes for ethnicity of Latino, Greek, Italian, and Irish.

Ron: There was also Tim Barela, who began penning Leonard & Larry in 1984. In a different context, but still part of the Bear artist cultural landscape.

Jack Fritscher: Tim is a fun cartoonist/comedian, like A. Jay. My list is more to note the early artists whose work years later is taken for granted as if it was always there, and is community property. Tom of Finland included hairy men, but Domino and Bill Ward roughed up the final image out of Tom's cleaner lines. For the pop-art-history fun of it, compare four drawings of lumberjacks by Tom, the Hun, Domino, and Bill Ward.

I'm trying to point out the evolution of some of these early people, because it parallels the emergence of different *Drummer* fetishes: cigars, bondage, leather, tits, fists, ballwork, tattoos, piercings, whatever. I didn't invent those things, but I was the first to codify them into concepts in dedicated articles, photo layouts, or covers, and bring them into pop focus. The fetishes were lurking in the gay psyche, like the Bear fetish, but no one had ever formalized them in print before. Every gay magazine since 1978 repeats those first fetishes. Nobody's come up with any new fetish or male look, because there are only so many things you can do with your body.

Ron: Your description of how each of these aspects of masculinity was brought out of the closet and into pop consciousness strikes me as there being a face put onto gay men, a de-anonymizing of gay men, just like “Tough Customers.”

Jack Fritscher: “Tough Customers” led directly into MAN2MAN, which first came out in January 1980 with musclebear Jim Enger on the cover. He was this very hairy - arms, chest, belly - bodybuilder who was famous on Castro, in L.A., and on the bodybuilding contest stage.

MAN2MAN specialized in real people asking and stating real erotic stuff. The masculine-identified gay press democratized itself into actually letting people speak for themselves. MAN2MAN didn't charge for personals ads by the word. The more readers wrote,

the longer the personal. I didn't just interview them for *Drummer* or write about them for MAN2MAN. I encouraged actual guys to speak in these magazines and in the California Action Guide. In a sense, my open-door policy to readers was like the Internet today: anybody can get on and strut his stuff. But back then, everything was controlled by all the difficulties of publishing and printing, guys had to go ISO [in search of] a magazine with an editor who might run their ad or not, depending on their whim. But I thought the most interesting thing to readers would be to see what other readers wanted. What emerged out of that was this "male verité," part of which was hardcore leathermen and Bears.

Ron: Giving gay men a vehicle to articulate their own voices was vastly empowering.

Jack Fritscher: You see, everybody talks about Gay Liberation but one real thing in actual Gay Liberation was to liberate the men who were men, homomale men, because that was the ultimate goal of '70s gay lib. My first lover, my Bear #1, was David Sparrow, whose photographs you can see in *Drummer*. Study our dynamic cover for *Drummer* #30: a shot of two very hairy porn stars arm-wrestling with very symbolic double-fisted forearms raised between them, referencing ancient classic statuary of wrestlers standing, as well as "hairy chests" and "biceps" as fetishes, and especially coded for the cover: fisting. I tried to put Bearish men on every cover.

David Sparrow, my lover of eight years, said to me that he really thought when he first came out that his manhood was doomed. "When I was in school in Evansville [Indiana] and I came out," he said, "I perceived in order to be gay you had to wear a sweater and white shoes. Then I came to Chicago and found out that wasn't the case." We all can thank Chuck Renslow and his Kris Studios and Etienne for pulling together a masculine look in the '50s and '60s so that men could realize their genetic masculinity. This is the original scholarship of a witness: Back then, nobody ever came out to go to bed with a gay man; gay men weren't even invented as an erotic type until something like 1973. Guys came out then - same as today - looking for straight-acting, straight-appearing partners. Guys wanted to fuck with Clint Walker or Steve Reeves.

Ron: Liberating masculinity was the whole point of it? And this leads to the liberation of Bears?

Jack Fritscher: The historical point in the '70s was to liberate everybody who was gay or lesbian in every shade of being gay and lesbian. But the hardest thing to be today in America is a man. The hardest thing to be in the world has always been a man. You can man-bash on commercials and talk shows and in Lilith songs. But if you turned that around and bashed women or blacks or homosexuals like that, there would be people writing letters and up in arms and demonstrating a "Million Whatever March" on the Capitol. But bashing men seems to be perfectly fine. Making men the villain because you feel put-upon is stupid, like blaming your father because you are experiencing the downside of "the human condition." Tough tits. Trashing masculinity leaves gay men nowhere to go as they try to escape the syndrome of sissy-fag JudyJudyJudyness. Gay men are called by nature's genes and by a personal inner voice to celebrate masculinity, man to man, without breeding. Guys who are male act like guys unless they are coerced into effeminacy by straights or into "sensitivity" by PC agenda.

Ron: So how did this previously submerged theme of ursomale develop and sprout in

the '80s?

Jack Fritscher: When *Drummer* changed hands in 1987, new publisher Tony DeBlase did much for Bears. He was a wonderful publisher of *Drummer*. I gave Tony a list of concepts that could be done for upcoming issues of *Drummer*. He immediately went for my “Bears and Mountain Men” theme which I wanted to enlarge from Bear's small 'zine size to large-format *Drummer*. If you look in *Drummer* #119 (July 1988), the Bear-mountain man issue, you'll see a whole list of upcoming themes in Tony's editorial and those are all themes I gave him.

Actually, that issue is the first full, glossy magazine presentation ever of Bears, including the first-ever Bear-themed feature article, “How to Hunt Buckskin Leather Mountain Men and Live among the Bears!” as expository analysis. That issue is full of Palm Drive photography of Bears, including the model John Muir from the cover and centerfold of the first issue of Bear. My Palm Drive Video was the first and only outside advertiser in that first issue. So incestuous is the Bear genesis, that many of my actors and models are the same actors and models whom Richard Bulger shot for his line of Live Bear Videos which followed Palm Drive Video.

Bear historians need to look at *Drummer's* seminal issues #19-30, and #119; the two-year, eight-issue run of the quarterly MAN2MAN; and the San Francisco tabloid, The California Action Guide, where for the first time anywhere, I put on the large-format cover the huge words: BEARS: HAIR FETISH RANCH, with a 2-page feature article inside.

Ron: That was five years before there was a Bear magazine.

Jack Fritscher: Bear was a consciousness whose time had come, because the gay population was aging. Slender, hairless, twentysomethings found that their bodies in their '30s were growing more hair than they had before and they were losing some of their slender body shape. They were turning into their own fathers. So physical genetic XY-ness drove men into the Bear cave. It was a new way to identify oneself. Sissiness had always been about doing Your Mother's Act. Bearness is about doing the best of Your Father's Act.

For some of us who were there and experienced this, we outed our own personal erotic desires, fantasies, and sex lives, and mainlined them into the gaystream, the manstream (no “i”), and the Bearstream.

So you're right. A theme is in the underground and then comes to the overground. Like leather was once underground, and then became overground fashion, mainstream runway fashion. Bearness became fashionable to some who think that to be a Bear you don't have to work out, and you can eat and drink and smoke and fuck all you want.

Ron: Bearness also embraced an ideal that also demonstrated that you don't have to have a big dick to be an erotic gay man.

Jack Fritscher: Well, that's one of the noncompetitive things about Bears. Bearness is not about dicks. That works as part of Bearness's beautiful Big Blank that includes all sizes, types, and trips, because it allows men, no matter how they're hung, to participate without feeling something is inferior about themselves.

Ron: Another thing that's always struck me about the Bear pictures of that era was that you see for the first time in what are supposed to be erotic pictures, you see flaccid penises. What a

concept - flaccid penises as erotic and hot.

Jack Fritscher: Yes. The potential. The time-lapse-like beauty of hardening. If you go to Musclebears.com or Musclebearz.com and Beefyboyz.com you'll see all these big guys. Some may show their dicks, but most don't. It helps to keep the site G-rated and acceptable, but also it proves the point that dick size is not so important as getting as big as you want to get.

Ron: What do you think of the mix of Girth & Mirth into Bear population?

Jack Fritscher: I think there are good reasons and bad reasons for wanting to be a certain size, emotional reasons that should perhaps be addressed clinically. Body weight is such a touchy issue in America, isn't it? Besides anorexic women and heavy women, we have anorexic men in WeHo and overweight men in San Francisco. People tend to want to make acceptable either what they can't control or a direction in which they want to go because of self-indulgence.

Ron: So does that apply to these two communities - heavy and hairy - that became one in the '90s?

Jack Fritscher: Well, you see, going back to the personals, which I will always retreat to as the place where gay culture's truth lies, there are always people looking for heavysset men (although a lot of ads state their preferences negatively, "no fats, no fems." What pulls them together, finally, is somebody riding in commercially on the natural voice of the personals and classified and figuring out how to make a magazine that is a different niche, which capitalized on all these ads from guys wanting heavysset guys.

Another example of niche marketing is guys wanting hillbillies - think of Gruff magazine, which had a lot of Bears in it. Gruff was a wonderful magazine. I don't know what's happened to it. Even if these magazines only exist for three or four issues, they pull together a zeitgeist.

Ron: Another example is that wonderful 'zine, Brains. They published one issue with a cover picture of the spectacle-wearing cartoon character Poindexter. It captured the imagination of any intellectual gay man who didn't fit in.

Jack Fritscher: Let's simplify the equation here. What Bear magazine did for hairy guys (and Richard [Bulger] didn't mean overweight Bears, by the way) was to pull together out of the zeitgeist a certain image. It focused that image between two covers the same way Life magazine in June 1965 pulled together out of the zeitgeist the leathermen, motorcycle, masculine homosexual and put him in its pages. Because Life did that, four years later Stonewall happened, and Stonewall would not have happened if Life, which was the most powerful piece of journalism in the country, had not sent out a welcome announcement to the masculine homosexual. We'd all still be wearing sweaters.

Leather was pulled together by Chuck Arnett in the Toolbox [leatherbar]. Then somebody who went to the Toolbox for fun decided it'd make a sensational article in Life magazine, and it was written up. That article served as an invitation sent out all across America and suddenly people had a new positive image to relate to. They felt, "Oh, that's how you do it, I've always felt that like Brando in *The Wild One*. I never felt like Bette Davis in *All About Eve*."

Bear culture came out as the magazine, *Bear*, flying on a concept based on all the activity, writing, thought, and photographs of the Bearish men that had gone on before. Richard Bulger was trying to find a niche and fill it, get laid, and make some money. So, Richard, finding a slice of the pie, chose Bears. He could just as easily have chosen husky men, as someone else did with Husky magazine imitating both MAN2MAN and *Bear*. As it was, Richard told publisher Mark Henry he chose MAN2MAN as his model.

Ron: Bear corresponded with Richard's own physical description, as well his own preferential description.

Jack Fritscher: Actually, Richard wrote in *Bear* that he did not consider himself a Bear. Yet out of his genetic makeup and style of living, what he did was find something to objectify and glorify by putting it into print. Nothing wrong with that because we create out of who we are. And he was mentally one of the Bears, absorbing Bear culture, reading the Bear demographic possibilities, and merchandising a mag to that culture.

I get phone calls, because we have a toll-free number at Palm Drive, from guys all across America, many of whom have lived in major cities but have gone home to take care of elderly parents. (It's not the straight sons and daughters but the gay sons, many of whom give up their big-city lives to go back to Podunk, Iowa, to take care of mom and dad.) So we get these calls, sometimes lonely and desperate calls, even from people who have never been out of Podunk, and they are so happy to find our work because they see themselves on screen and that's what people want to see.

I've had models come to me who've been shaved and shorn by Colt Studios. After Colt shoots them, they can't get a date because everyone thinks they're so gorgeous they're untouchable. They grow back their natural hair and I shoot them and throw dirt on them to make them accessible. After I shoot a guy, he looks touchable, because he looks real, like you could walk up to him, and lay him.

Ron: Going from being a statue to being a teddy bear.

Jack Fritscher: Well, going from being the Platonic Ideal of a man to being a physical man. Colt is the most gloriously platonic studio ever. Jim French is an incredible photographer in form and content.

If there is a Jesus Christ who gave birth to Christianity, there is a Ledermeister (Paul Garrion), who gave birth of Urso-Ur-masculinity, and who connects to Jim Enger, who connects to Colt's Clint Lockner, who was the actual LAPD cop who was Jim Enger's lover before I was. Then Clint Lockner took up with Colt model Dan Pace (Dan Padilla) who was quite Bearish and hairy. I was very lucky as *Drummer's* editor to live and love within an enclave of very rich, very hairy, wonderfully muscular Bears driving Corvettes and playing L.A. cops on Harley Sportsters. This life led to the first bear-themed novel, *Some Dance to Remember*, which is also about other masculinist themes.

Ledermeister also leads into Richard Locke, who leads into the Gage brothers flicks, which goes straight into the work of Old Reliable and his street boys, many of whom are naturally Bearish cubs, and that's a whole different cut of gay and straight sociology coming together.

Ron: I always think of the book series *Straight to Hell* - a marvelous sexual pun like "Palm Drive" - as the written equivalent of Old Reliable videos.

Jack Fritscher: Exactly. STH publisher Boyd MacDonald and writer Sam Steward (writing as Phil Andros) are two of the godfathers of homomascularity. The high romance of Bears was all in place in the late '70s and early '80s.

Finally, in the mid-80s, Richard Bulger took Bearness and ratcheted the requirements down a few notches so that it would accommodate the more relaxed, more natural look. He folded in the aging hippie thing.

Ron: And the biker thing. Richard Bulger synthesized these elements in order to make it accessible. Also, I suspect, in order to get models he could afford!

Jack Fritscher: He made it appeal to a wider audience, an underserved demographic niche, so that he could sell magazines. Nothing wrong with that. Bear magazine is a marketing phenom appropriate to the sunny capitalism of gay lib. Bear and American Bear have become a wonderful business that services a lot of people and makes a lot of people happy and that's a wonderful thing, because most gay magazines don't make people happy. Most mags are full of politics, disease, and agenda, and sometimes even details we need to know about, but they're not part of erotic fantasy. The Bear cult in the age of AIDS has given relief because Bears offer an image of robust health in a time of the "thin disease." In order to combat something as horrific as AIDS, we need the wonderful look of full-blown Bears. Oddly enough, Chris Nelson's studio wasn't called "Bear," it was called "Brahma." They were working with both the bull and bear thing and trying to rope as much concept together as they could. "Bull" could have caught fire as easily as "Bear."

Ron: Tell me more about your interactions with Richard and Chris and the "salons" that Richard used to have.

Jack Fritscher: Well, I call the get-togethers that Richard hosted "salons," although they never did. But Richard ran a "salon" just like David Hurler at Old Reliable and I at *Drummer* - Richard would have these models and wannabe models stop by his place and hang out. He had a kind of open door policy; he would shoot casual videos in his bedroom or in his shower. Some Bear models we shared were John Muir, Sonny Butts, and Jason Steele. Richard never went on location. I always took models on location, because I wanted to get their different energy in different places.

Ron: Are you talking about his home base at the Firehouse in the Mission, where he lived with Chris and had the Bear offices?

Jack Fritscher: Not at first. Initially, his salon was his living quarters in a former storefront near Church Street. I loved those open-door policies in the '70s. Everybody had them. You couldn't even live in the Castro and go down to get your mail without getting laid. Sex was everywhere. You'd open the door and have sex with whoever came through it.

In the '80s, Richard opened up his place to models and photographers. To start his magazine he needed to have people come through there - new people, new-new-new people - so

it became sort of like my *Drummer* office had been in the '70s, a kind of a little gay Bloomsbury where everybody who was anybody showed up. If you didn't go to the *Drummer's* editor's office and then go out to lunch and then get fucked one way or another, you weren't happening in the '70s. Richard's "salon" in the '80s was not that high-profile or high-powered. Richard Bulger's scene was always very laid back, because there was no money or power involved there. His was just an interesting place for guys to hang out. Very low-key. People traded ideas, models, tricks.

It was just like David Hurles' apartment, where there was the brilliant-genius David Hurles and me and all these tough and rough and very butch models. Happening at the same time, Richard's was a safe urban, gay place for guys to go in the afternoon as a way to kill time and hang out and see who was hot and shoot some stuff. Richard was introducing younger guys into the Bear concept. They didn't necessarily need to be Bears, as long as they would have sex with Bears. So it was kind of a "Bear Bloomsbury" in the sexual and photographic sense, but there was no high intellect or high power or high money going on there. Richard had the touch for hosting a homey little club out of which was coming this newsletter, this magazine, which he, in his great talent, turned into a great empire, basically by pulling together a concept and then selling it.

Ron: What was your personal take on Richard? Where was his head, and what were his aspirations? Do you think he expected this to take off in the way it did?

Jack Fritscher: I think Richard started Bear as a device, as often happens, to get laid. Then it took on a life of its own. Photography is a reliable way to get beautiful guys to take their clothes off. Old Reliable was doing it with straight street hustlers out of the Old Crow hustler bar on Market. Richard was shooting normal gay men from the Ambush. The gay press at first did not understand either photographer. Every editor refused Old Reliable until I broke him wide open in *Drummer* in 1978. Outside of *Drummer*, no editor would touch Bearish men, until Richard Bulger dared to open Bear magazine in 1987. David Hurles deserved the attention, because he is a genius who knew what he was doing. I'm not sure that Richard had as full a vision as David Hurles, but never underestimate the talent of Richard Bulger. He is one of the most gracious men I've ever met in the carnivorous gay scene.

I'm not privy to what his business thoughts were, other than that he asked Mark Henry and me how we produced MAN2MAN, so he could produce Bear; who we used for printers, mechanical information, distribution. Of course, everybody who starts a gay magazine gets offers from somebody to buy it, whether from somebody gay or from the Mafia.

Ron: Please tell me about your interactions with Chris.

Jack Fritscher: My relationship with Chris Nelson was almost totally silent. I can't remember him ever speaking. He was extremely talented and knew what he was doing. When he shot me for a photo-spread in one of the early issues of Bear, it was a very nondirected shoot. He was distant and far away. He even kept the camera far away. Maybe it was just me, but I think he knew I'd have some sort of sense of what I wanted to do. Essentially, I was just turned loose in front of the camera. He captured this impromptu performance art with his more formal still camera.

Look at the absolutely archetypal cover of *The Bear Cult*, Chris Nelson's coffeetable book of photographs: a guy in jeans and boots with his shirt off standing by a car from under which another guy's boots stick out. That's romantic and existential. Notice the sense of humor

that comes through: the shirtless Bear standing next to a car, with a leg coming from underneath the car, obscuring the license plate. Now that's a Bear in a Bear situation: two guys, a combustion engine, a crotch objectified and deliciously detached from a person.

Ron: Accentuated by the grimy hand of the guy underneath the car visibly holding a wrench and grasping the leg of the man standing up. What was your assessment, if any, of the professional relationship between Chris and Richard?

Jack Fritscher: One was alpha and one was beta. They had their roles and supported each other. I just found Chris very silent - something I adore in a man. Chris was the voyeur with a camera. Richard was the exhibitionist displaying the wares of Bear. Chris was some kind of scientist in the real world. In the gay world, he was this great photographer, and his photography speaks for itself and has to be appreciated, studied, and looked at formally as real art because he transcends gay art. Too often, I think he is forgotten, subsumed into the whole Bear concept, because that concept of Bear will eat anything: photographers, videographers, writers, artists. Nearly all of us who create Bear art, stories, videos are personally unknown to the bears who jerk off to our work.

Ron: The diversity of Bear images in *The Bear Cult* shows all the body-types of Bears, from skinny, hairy boys to heavyweight grizzlies, as well as Bears of all colors.

Jack Fritscher: *The Bear Cult* contains a diversity of Bears in weight and ethnicity and shows the first principle that you don't have to be thin or fat to be a Bear, but even his 1990 shot on page 40 of John and Joe clothed is incredibly erotic.

Ron: Joe and John, who are now the owners of the SF Eagle.

Jack Fritscher: The shot descends in a straight line from the famous Mapplethorpe photograph of Brian Ridley and Lyle Heeter. Look at it and lay it against this one and you'll see, in that long tradition of formal photographs, how Chris Nelson works. His photographs are very masculine, and thus, phallic. He shoots hardons. Yet his photographs work erotically even when the models are clothed. His mystique comes from clothing as fetish when worn by rugged men.

Ron: Another compelling aspect of Chris's work is the clarity of his images, the way he graphically portrays these hairy bodies. In a certain way his photography is as glamorous as Bruce Weber shooting smooth bodies, yet it's much harder to photograph hairy than smooth skin.

Jack Fritscher: Another important point is that Bears have to be groomed in an entirely different way. In my dreams, I see one day, a Bear-physique contest where actual bodybuilders are not shaved, but are judged on quality of body hair, grooming of pelt, as much as muscle - but, hey, that's just me. I love to groom Bear bodies.

Ron: Now that would be a Bear contest I'd enjoy judging! How would you describe that kind of grooming?

Jack Fritscher: Take a Bear preparing to go out. My Bear #2, Jim Enger, might sculpt his body hair to a certain length. He sometimes trimmed his body hair, which was about two inches long, to within an inch. He would groom his hairy forearms, back-combing the hair against the way it flowed so that each gold strand would stand up and catch the sunlight in a certain way. He would use Coppertone to back-brush the hair on his forearms. Bears must groom their fur. So many Bears are dramatically upholstered with hair, but they don't groom themselves with interest. Brushing the chest, arms, belly, legs - all that makes for much finer presentation. Grooming the Bear body with olive oil instead of baby oil gives a completely different presentation of Bear fur. One of the photographs referred to earlier that captures "Bearness" and masculinity is page 10 in *The Bear Cult*: John Muir.

Ron: That's Chris's choice for the first portrait in the book.

Jack Fritscher: It's an absolutely incredible portrait, so much so that we received permission for that years ago to use on a Palm Drive brochure. So that's how aligned Richard and I were. We were on the same page doing the same thing. He called his gig *Bear* (1987) and we called ours *MAN2MAN* magazine (1980), the *California Action Guide* (1982), and *Palm Drive Video* (1984).

As much as I love Ted [Lucie-Smith], in his introduction to Chris's book, he focused on Richard Bulger as if Bearness dawned full-blown from *Bear*. In actuality, *Bear* magazine emerged from a Bearness that had already existed for at least 15 years before the magazine.

Ron: I agree completely - so let's return to tracing the genesis of the *Bear*. What is your take on how the *Bear*-themed media has evolved since the time Chris left and then shortly after Richard sold *Brush Creek*? Do you see any particular trends?

Jack Fritscher: Again, it's the democratizing out of the personals ads through "Tough Customers" into *MAN2MAN* so that you now have a better reflection of real people, rather than models. It really pains me when I see, in *Bear* or other magazines, pictures consisting of nothing more than video "modelles" who are put in to fill pages because their video producer wants to get free advertising. I mean, those video "modelles" are hired for three hours to go fuck somebody. They have nothing to do with culture per se. They're actors and their plastic images get pumped into some of these magazines. Again, it hurts the real culture because they aren't real.

I find most of my guys on the street and in hardware stores and in Home Depot and in gyms. I've never used a modeling agency in my life. "Weho modelles" have that certain dead-again look...

Ron: They go from amateur to professional after that initial time.

Jack Fritscher: No, they go from real to false. What is amateur and what is professional? To the straight world, anything gay is amateur. Our gay magazines are amateur, gay publishing of books is amateur. What we're doing in your book is amateur to the straight world because they won't even review it. They don't have categories for it. Your book, however, is very real. You're getting real conversation out all the people in your book, and that is what you want: a book *vérité*. *Bear* *vérité* is what you want, and I'm trying to give you *Bear* *vérité* in terms of how *Bear* threads its pop culture way through gay culture as a masculine piece of DNA mapping the

genome of Bear.

People can take from it what they want or add to it what they want, but Bears have proceeded through this march, this long gay parade that comes down from 1969, well, before that of course, but let's just say from 1969. We're all marching together and Bears are one very specific contingent in that. These magazines right now continue to feature an explicit group but how long they can continue, I don't know. I think they will be supplanted by the Internet, because at the same time you're talking about Bear culture like it's Bear magazine, but it happens not to be Bear magazine because it happens to be Bear videos which fund that magazine.

Ron: It seems to me that the vast majority of Bear culture lives off the page and outside the VCR. It lives in the Bearclubs and Bear Websites and the Bear runs and confabs.

Jack Fritscher: Now that's a "real" Bear experience, going off with another predictable Bear from some convention so that you can hug. Cool. I'm not knocking it, but why not get an unpredictable Bear, a straight guy, and do all this Bear stuff (wrestling, biking, eating) with him, especially if he knows what he's doing and he brings to you all the authenticity of the police force or the Marine Corps or the WWF and lays it on top of you, because you fantasize about wrestlers, bikers, and jarheads? Bring on the real thing, not the gay imitation. Not all Bear eros is actual sex. How narrow.

Ron: But most gay Bears wouldn't act upon their desire for that kind of sex. They'd be too intimidated.

Jack Fritscher: Then they're not really Bears, because being a Bear is a state of mind and if you're afraid of the real thing, you're not a Bear. That's the test! Get it? I always love it when people say they are gay and shy. How can you be shy after you've dare come out? For God's sake, what else is there to be shy about? If you're a Bear and afraid, then you're not really a Bear, although you might look like one.

If you don't have the courage of your convictions, then you don't deserve to be gay, or a Bear, or a man, or anything. That is what it is to be grown up, to go get what you want.

Ron: I don't think most people do that, gay or straight. Most people don't think they can live their fantasies.

Jack Fritscher: If you don't live your fantasies, you're a failure. And a fool. Getting what you want is not living a fantasy; it's actualizing your potential. Remember, ultimately nobody gives a good goddamn what you do. Nobody's watching, unless you're Mr. Clinton and the Right Wing Coup wants to get you on everything - but if he weren't the most powerful person in the world, they wouldn't care. You can do whatever you want because nobody cares what you do - I'm talking about you personally and me personally. Nobody gives a fine fuck. I could go fuck somebody in the street and outside of people crying, "Omigod, the children, the children," nobody cares at all. So to be intimidated is not part of the archetypal Bear ideal. A Bear should be the intimidating one. I think [author and "sexpert"] Susie Bright is a Bear.

Ron: Absolutely.

Jack Fritscher: But she doesn't intimidate me and I don't intimidate her. We can stand up on our hind legs and roar at each other, which is wonderful. So it's not even about gender.

Ron: Certainly, courage and fortitude have nothing to do with what you have between your legs.

Jack Fritscher: Right, and if we don't take the analog and internalize what Bear is, or what leather is, or muscle, and find out what Bear or leather or muscle is to us psychologically and spiritually, it's just a fashion, a style, an affectation from which we've learned nothing. Like leathers bought in the back of a bar.

Ron: That's exactly the point about Bear spirit, that there has to be some sort of internal identification.

Jack Fritscher: It's completely necessary because without internalizing it, there's no point to it. If it's just an external, physical thing, you're not going to be a very good Bear playmate because you don't understand it. Even if you look like the ideal Bear, such as Jack Radcliffe or Chris Duffy, it doesn't make any difference internally.

I didn't turn out looking like these people either, but on the inside, I can turn on the switch and be the Bear, I can turn on the switch and be the bodybuilder. I can turn on the switch and be the sadistic leather top. I could turn on the switch and be the masochistic bottom if I could just find someone to be the top. But with all these shy Bears running around, what good are they? Underneath them all is Ms. Piggy.

There's nothing worse than seeing a big brute doing all this standing and posing at a Bear convention or in a Bear bar, only to then watch him pirouette out the door. Talk about a fall from platonic grace! Even though I'm just saying that to be funny, truly, if the Bear isn't the totem animal on the shield of the tribe, and if you don't live the "Bearishness" of being Bear, then you are only a faux Bear. A fairy in a "fake-fur" coat. You're faking "Bear" and you do Bears a disservice.

Some men, who have nowhere else to turn for acceptance of their avoirdupois, suddenly christen themselves "Bear." And every day the measure goes up on what weight a Bear is before he becomes a Chubby. And that's fine. I'm not criticizing anybody. I'm just positing an existential analysis of the situation. A man's health is his very best possession. Nobody should betray his health in the name of being a Bear.

Ron: This is characteristic in some ways of the human condition, in general, and the condition of being an American, which is that most people will choose to buy the Bear T-shirt and wear it on the outside without internalizing any of the inner qualities of the bear.

Jack Fritscher: Exactly. Bear has appeal because it's not exclusionary. It includes anybody who wants to call themselves Bear or have Bear spirit. Unfortunately, it's a cheap way to pull off an image. If it's just image, fine. But I'm interested in the essential Bear, just like the essential leatherman and the essential bodybuilder. If you go into any crowd of Bears, you'll see mostly a bunch of stereotypes, rather than an archetype. Now, all those stereotypes could move toward the archetype, could transform themselves into the archetype by meditating on it, by thinking about it, by spiritualizing themselves and walking into that identity. But most gay men don't

even know how to walk like a man! I mean, there needs to be a “butch” academy - not in the bad sense of butch - to overcome the self-hating effeminacy and PC-whipped passivity lived as lifestyle by some gay men.

Ron: Oh, you mean, just like they opened up schools for gay men to learn how to do drag.

Jack Fritscher: Ugh. PC apparatchiks in the gay press sometimes misunderstand because I say things like “Men are valid. Masculinity is valid.” It drives them crazy because they think I'm attacking them and their sweaters. They have every right to be the way they are. Yet I'm not talking about them, I'm talking about the other side of being gay, which is about expressing a masculine, sexual way of being. There's no worse insult to a woman than drag, because all that drag does is point up the stereotypical worse things that women do, because it emphasizes the superficial things.

Ron: All the makeup, glitter, big hair, and heaving bodices. Usually it takes place within an extremely negative, hateful, and fearsome environment.

Jack Fritscher: Right. Drag embraces all the things that women themselves eschew - makeup, bras, dresses, and everything that has been out of style for 40 years. Again, that's fine if somebody wants to do it, but that's not what being “Bear” is about. Being Bear is choosing to be a certain way, about honoring a certain way that you are in and of yourself. And if you really identify as being Bear - and I think it is a good way to get laid - then you're going to have to investigate the Bearishness of yourself and what it is to be Bear. The “incredible lightness of being bear,” right?

Ron: Or perhaps the incredible heft of being Bear, as the case may be. But what you're speaking of is Bearness as a life path, like the path of the warrior. There's a marvelous book, unfortunately out of print, called *The Sacred Paw: The Bear in History, Myth and Literature*. The number of points of commonality between four-legged creatures and humans is amazing. We could be taking from this identification a wealth of meaning to serve our own personal transformation. Yet if you ask most men who identify as Bears what they feel they have in common with the four-legged creature - which I did while researching this book - all they can think of is the hair, maybe the girth. Not a word about strength, endurance, speed, courage, fierceness, appetite. In fact, most Bears think bears are slow, dumb, fat animals.

Jack Fritscher: They think bears are fat, but bears aren't fat. Bears are bears. Right, they're big, they're not fat.

Ron: They can store an incredible amount of fat, sometimes as much as a half of foot of fat.

Jack Fritscher: Right, bears hibernate; we don't. There's a point where the anthropomorphism fails. You might also want to mention the [also out of print] book *Bulls through the Ages* by Ralph Whitlock, because in a sense it does the same things, taking the bull identification on the shield as an archetypal icon in the gay tribe. There are all these different creatures that you can turn to, to objectify these internal characteristics.

The “bear” concept is a mode of expression that can be used archetypically or stereotypically and it's a handle on human psychology. It's a way to take all the negatives associated with homosexuality and turn them into positives. Thus, men no longer think they have to be either effeminate like sweater kveens or hard like leathermen, although both stereotypes are misconceptions, too.

Ron: Perhaps by moving outside of oneself into the bear archetype, one gains perspective on being a true human, or man. That has potential for being truly liberating. How you might see the Bear phenomenon evolving in the future?

Jack Fritscher: I think it is time now for the archiving of Bear to begin. Your book is one of the first to go into gathering some of this together, but even so you're getting people talking. Somebody needs to start gathering the primary materials of Bearness together like photographs, videos, and magazines. If anybody really wants to pursue this, they should start looking at the images in some of the magazines that have existed for years and especially look at the videos.

Ron: You mentioned the idea of the needs for a serious archiving effort. I would agree, but absent some kind of endowment, I don't see that happening. We need to be better endowed.

Jack Fritscher: No pun intended. Well, leatherarchives.org is supported by the Leather Archives, which in a few years has gone from zero to having a jazzy building and thousands of dollars sent to it by guys who send money to belong to groups. And beararchives.com could be funded by the Bear Archives, which could be started by somebody who gets a grant or just puts out a newsletter.

Ron: To accomplish that kind of task requires . . .

Jack Fritscher: . . . a fundraising effort by somebody who is going to organize it and be legit and include everything from oral history, magazine and book writing, videos, and seminars, to the philosophy, psychology, teleology, and spirituality of Bearness.

Ron: Among subculture Bears, however, there's tremendous resistance to any kind of organization. They feel it's antithetical to what Bearness is all about, as if it was only about being hairy homo homeboys. Once when I posted onto the BML [Bears Mailing List] the idea of having a Bear leadership conference, I received so much negative mail, there was so little support for it, maybe 10:1. People just thought it was the most ridiculous thing in the world.

Jack Fritscher: Because who wants to join anything and have it talked to death? I mean, I wouldn't get involved in it. I hate that sort of stuff, I really do, but that doesn't mean it shouldn't be done. But there has to be the right kind of person, the right personality. Like any project it is a projection of the one person whose personality pulls it together, just like Richard Bulger pulled together Bear.

It comes out of somebody wanting to do that, but you can't really organize the masses to contribute to your project. They don't want to do it. It's like me in the '70s trying to pull *Drummer* into focus. I wrote nearly every word in it and took nearly every photograph and begged every artist who ever drew anything to, “Please, draw me something for *Drummer*,”

because everybody was having sex. Nobody wanted to stop fucking long enough to contribute, but they all wanted to have *Drummer* in their hands as soon as it came out, so in between having sex in the baths and backrooms and on the streets, they would have something more to jerk off to at night when they were home alone recuperating. That's when your Bears live inside their VCRs, magazines, and books. Recuperating. Hibernating.

These things happen because the time is ripe and then an individual who is right for it pulls it together.

Ron: Well, hopefully someone will come forward to take up that work.

Jack Fritscher: It's like all my work. That's what I do. I try to gather oral history. I had a grant in 1972 to do an oral history of Sam Steward. That's all on audio tape. All these bits and pieces that float through the filing cabinets and all that, a kind of www.JackFritscher.com archive; but one day it will be part of a larger library. It includes gay literature, gay culture, gay history, and all much more. Right now it's going out over the Internet and in a series of books, which in the next couple of years will timeline everything together. All the work that you and Les Wright are doing is wonderful, but one day we'll all be a dusty chapter in Bear archives. One day we'll just be a footnote in the larger picture of Bear. *Ursus Horribilis* will eat everything that is now and move on to the next thing in the future.

Ron: Bears don't eat their young, I think.

Jack Fritscher: Gay ones do. And their old. That reminds me of the dustup over the use of the word "Bear." There were a bunch of people fighting over the use of the word "Bear" about ten years ago. Somebody asked me what I thought of it, and I said, "I used Bear in the first issue of *MAN2MAN* in December 1979/January 1980 before any of you came to town. So [blows raspberry]! You can do what you want, but your antecedents are here. You didn't think it up, nor did I think it up, it was something that was there but I articulated it first." Everybody backed down. Emerson said, "We're all pygmies standing on the shoulders of giants." So we all just take what went before and fold it into the new way things are.

It will be interesting to see where Bears will be by 2003. Some 16-year-old guy, who will be 19 in three years, will pick up your book and look at it, and suddenly the light bulb will go on over his head and a whole new way of being Bear will emerge. Some actor, some player will come along and change the "Bear look." Just as the ways of being gay and the ways of being male change, the way of being Bear will change as well. We're not at "Full *Ursus*" yet!

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Ron Suresha