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# Yellow

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October 2020

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## From The Editor:

In this issue of Yellow, we're proud to present our Society of Janus exclusive, an interview with noted author, activist, and historian of popular culture and gay male culture. If you'd like more articles like this, please let us know. --Coco

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## In Conversation with Jack Fritscher, Ph.D.: Novelist, Journalist, Photographer, Videographer, Educator, Former Editor of Drummer magazine, Recipient of the "Lifetime Achievement Award 2020" from the National Leather Association International and legendary San Francisco gay leather icon By Heather Feathers

Back in April, when COVID -19 and shelter in place had only just begun to take hold, I had the privilege to speak with Jack Fritscher by phone. We discussed his journey into leather, his role at Drummer Magazine and his production company, Palm Drive Video. He shared both his wealth of knowledge on Leather Culture and his exciting new projects in the works. He told stories woven with messages that we can all relate to as we navigate this new reality. Here are some highlights:

**Q:** *I would love to learn more about your journey into leather and specifically the San Francisco leather community.*

**JF:** You mean how I got interested in it as a child or as a teenager? Or? that far?

**Q:** *I mean if you would like to share, I think a lot of people are being really reflective about their journey into BDSM, and into leather so I would love to hear your story.*

**JF:** Well as I think back, I came to consciousness during World War II so the first movies I saw were a musical, or a western, but between them there were newsreels of Nazis and Nazi atrocities, that kind of thing that were very scary, and impressed children of my age very much as we were going into preschool and kindergarten first grade. We all became very attached to men in uniform because all our fathers, and brothers, and uncles were gone as well as the boy next door, so they became romanticized in their uniforms. Also, being a Catholic altar boy, there was a whole martyr-ology of the Saints who suffered all these terrible things as young men and young women where the Roman gladiators would torture them to death in the arena.

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that kind of conspired to be an erotic turn-on because of counterphobia; when you see something that scares you, you often times turn it into something that thrills you in order to deal with the fright. And so, a lot of the horror that I saw from World War II, a lot of the romance from the soldiers being gone, and the horror of the Roman martyr-ology and Catholicism. Even today is Good Friday and on this day, Jesus has been whipped, stripped, and spit upon by Roman soldiers, paraded naked and nailed to a cross... I mean if you are raised on that, where are you going to go except a leather bar?

**Q:** *So, are you originally from San Francisco? Where did you start going to leather bars?*

**JF:** Well, I grew up in Illinois and went to school in Ohio, and everyone was afraid of Chicago, so I would escape to Chicago to express myself. The first place where I was able to do that was first when I was 14, I escaped from Peoria on the train, went to Chicago and nosed all around in bookstores and so forth and eventually came across magazines like "[Tomorrow's Man](#)", which was a magazine basically filled with photos that were often times shot by [Chuck Renslow](#) at his Kris Studios where he would feature bodybuilders with a leather strap across their chest, or leather gloves leaning up against a motorcycle. He and [Etienne](#) we're already creating art which was influencing this little leather boy as he was coming out of the closet in the 1950s. So, as a graduate student in Chicago, even before that, of course I was going out cruising around and just checking homosexuality in general, but knew that I always ended up near [The Gold Coast](#) (*Chuck Renslow's bar: the first openly gay leather bar in the country*) because I liked the men going in and out. Eventually, I got up the courage to go in because I'd been subscribing to leather things like the wonderful [Studio Royale in London at 110 Demby Street](#). I still remember they would send you these gorgeous 5x7 photographs of British Squaddies in little bits of military kit spanking each other, tying each other up, dressing as sailors, tying other young guys up for whipping on a ship and all that kind of stuff that comes right out of Melville's, Billy Budd which is in a way a gay S&M story.

**Q:** *So you finally got the courage to go into the Gold Coast?*

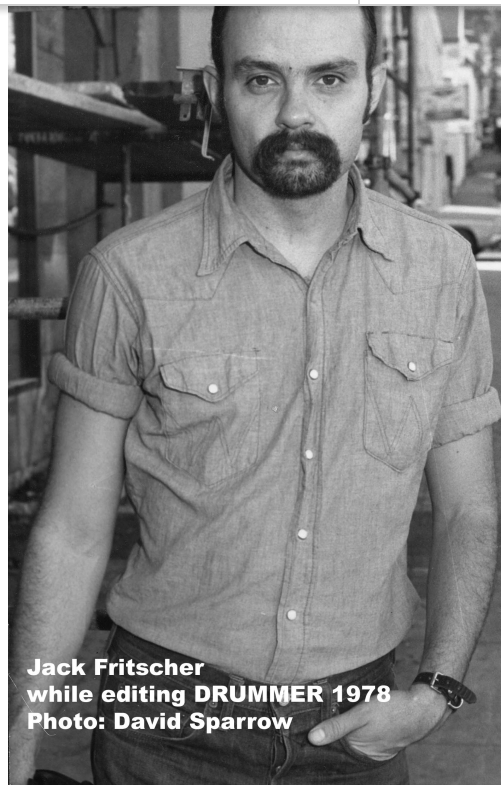
**JF:** Right, because Chuck Renslow, who was the leather czar of Chicago, he created the whole leather scene in Chicago and eventually **IML** and the [Leather Archives & Museum](#). So, it was his photography and Etienne's drawings from the 1970s that fueled my imagination and showed me that as a writer and a photographer I could grow up and do the same.

**Q:** *Did he mentor you?*

**JF:** No, eventually in the early 1960s we became friends, but he did not mentor me. He did indirectly through his publications. He dared publish things to fight against censorship in order to get leather images, and leather photographs, and leather drawings, and leather writing out into bookstores where you could go and see these little magazines like *Tomorrow's Man* and *Mars* which was one of Chuck's magazines. I remember one-time in Old Town in Chicago in 1960, I was in a bookstore and I was looking at some of these little physique magazines and a voice stood behind me and said, "what are you studying in high school?" and it was the owner of the bookstore, and I turned around and said, "actually I'm in college." Because I was raised as an altar boy, I think that caused my aging process to slow down; when I was 25, I looked like I was 16. It was kind of funny, but it was also hard to deal with (*laughs*). When you were in a bookstore and the age to look at those magazines was 21, he was trying to sneak up behind me and ask me how I liked high school in order to trick me when I was off guard. There were all these censors and people in between us and leather culture as you come out.

The interesting thing is that I think that everybody, when they're in the closet thinks that they invented homosexuality and leather sex themselves. My brother was turned on by the Marines and had to join them. I was turned on by the marines and what they did in training and the brig but I didn't join them. I joined them on another level of fantasy and eroticism that I think was something my brother wanted, but went for the real thing and found the real thing was very disappointing.

**Q:** *Well, that can often be the case when you have a fantasy about something and then you try to make it a real thing. When did you come into the San Francisco leather scene?*



**Jack Fritscher**  
while editing **DRUMMER 1978**  
Photo: David Sparrow

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[City Lights Bookstore](#) and stood around the physique magazines, which were in a little carousel. You know how they have greeting cards in a carousel? Well they had physique magazines in a carousel like that. I hoped by turning the carousel that I'd spin it enough to spin into existence one of those people in the pictures who could show up there in the bookstore because I was sure... because I was an intellectual, that thought everything came from books, that bookstores were where you can find anything. I thought I could spin that rack until a leather man or a body builder in leather appeared and walked in the door. And what I did was walk out the door and walk around and was amazed by what I saw! Even [The Toolbox](#) had just opened, but of course I didn't know that that time and was not able to go there then, but I went there soon after and it turned out to be one of my favorite bars.

So, really my adult life in San Francisco began in the late 60s and early 70s. I always considered it the hometown of my heart. I was born in the Midwest, but I was reborn in California in San Francisco. It became my home in 1961 because I thought I didn't know how gay I am, I don't know how into S&M I am, but I know this is a town where I want to live.

**Q:** *I think it definitely feels like home when a lot of people come here who don't find as much acceptance as in other places. Do you feel that you found more acceptance in both the gay lifestyle and the BDSM lifestyle here?*

**JF:** Yes, because San Francisco is always open even before there was a Golden Gate for everybody that came here. In fact, my first ancestor who came from Ireland landed in New Orleans then took a Wagon Train and came all the way to San Francisco for the *Gold Rush* in 1849. He panned enough gold and made himself enough of a little fortune to go back to the Midwest and buy a little Orchard Farm.

**Q:** *Wow! So, it is like a full circle?*

**JF:** It makes sense because my grand-grand uncle came here because of the *Gold Rush*. I felt that I had ancestral roots here.



From the Collections of the Leather Archives & Museum Chicago, IL

**Q:** *So, you started going to these bars like The Toolbox in the late 60's, 70's. Is that when you began to delve into the San Francisco leather community? and what was it like back then? I would love to know.*

**JF:** In 1964, this issue of [Life Magazine](#) arrived that I wrote about in [Drummer](#) in 1988. Everybody remembers that, but I actually remember it arriving at my parents' home. I was 25 years old; it was my 25th birthday actually, and this magazine arrived, and it had a big article on The Toolbox. Then I realized I had missed this in San Francisco earlier, so as soon as I came back to San Francisco, I went to The Toolbox cuz that magazine issue was like an engraved

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leather bar. That was where I met [Chuck Arnett](#), the great artist who opened that bar and managed it and painted that mural that was in 1964 *Life* article. He was schooled by Etienne in Chicago who is the partner of Chuck Renslow who had put out all those little magazines. So you can see how it all came together, and then I got both Etienne and Renslow to contribute to *Drummer* when I was the editor so I went from being a consumer of their magazines and their Bar art and became the producer, editor of that art.

Because I knew I was that kind of writer, photographer, artist. I thought while they weren't writers, their art was more graphic but as an artist who does drawing and photography and film making, as well as being a writer, I can bring all that together and begin writing about them in *Drummer* because *Drummer* was the first draft of leather history.

In brief, in 1960, in the mid-60s, [Clark Polack](#) in Philadelphia started a little gay magazine called, *Drum*. And then in LA in the late 60s, [Larry Townsend](#) started a newsletter called *H.E.L.P.*, '*Homophile Effort for Legal Protection*'. It gathered money together to bail out leather men entrapped by the LAPD. Then that little magazine grew into a little marketing brochure called *Drummer* put out by an LA ad man named [John Embry](#). John Embry's *Drummer* magazine which was available for 25 cents (it was basically about selling his poppers and cock rings mail order, but also reported on bars in LA.) merged with the *H.E.L.P.* thing to be more, because Embry wanted the mailing list from *H.E.L.P.* in order to sell the prototype of *Drummer*. So that went on for about two or three years with a lot of struggle in LA because of the politics and because of the entrapment and the hetero-phobia of chief, Ed Davis of the LAPD. So *Drummer*, (came) out of those two magazines, then the first slick which people came to know as *Drummer* was published on June 20<sup>th</sup> 1975. Eleven months later, because *Drummer* had gained such rapid popularity in LA, and because it showed masculine homosexual rather than effeminate homosexuals, it frightened Ed Davis to see Butch men who could resist his cops. Butch men dressed in uniforms were better turned out than his cops and their uniforms. So out of jealousy and homophobia and his conservative right-wing agenda, when *Drummer* was 11 months old, before it really had a chance to get started in LA, it was busted on April 10th at the famous *Drummer* charity slave auction. As a result of that Embry was in court for years, and *Drummer* had to flee from disaster in LA to destiny in San Francisco. It was in San Francisco that this 11-month-old magazine, that to survive, struggling to be born came to San Francisco. I remember Embry said it was like leaving East Berlin for Oz, the change was so great. And so in San Francisco he hired me to be San Francisco founding editor. He knew that I had a Rolodex of artists and writers and photographers that he would need because the LA talent basically stayed behind in LA, the people that he'd used down there. So, it was at that point that *Drummer* moved from being an LA Magazine to being a San Francisco magazine because at that time SF was way more leathery than LA. And then from San Francisco, *Drummer* really launched as a Nationwide magazine, and then it became an international gay leather magazine. and that's how this all grew.

**Q:** And now you've written a book on the history of *Drummer* magazine. What is the full title of your book and where can readers purchase it?

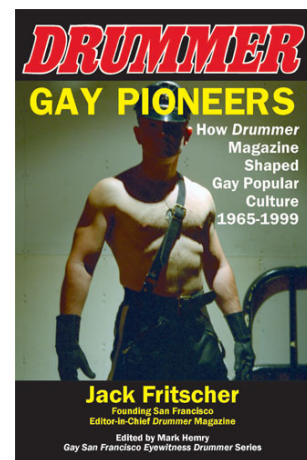
**JF:** Well, I've written two actually on the history of *Drummer* and they're both posted free in PDFs at my site: <http://www.JackFritscher.com>. Also, people can read them for free and the new flip book version my lover and partner Mark Henry has put together. So we want this history to be out there and available free to all and the book titles are in short: [Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer: A Memoir of the Sex, Art, Salon, Pop Culture War, and Gay History of Drummer Magazine - The Titanic 1970s to 1999 - Volume 1](#) and, [Gay Pioneers: How Drummer Magazine Shaped Gay Popular Culture 1965-1999](#).



Each chapter is like an article because, while I've written novels and screenplays and plays that have been produced in various ways, my first love has always been magazines. So, when I write my books, I write them like I wrote my dissertation on Tennessee Williams which was eighteen chapters. So, eighteen magazine articles strung together. Something might be mentioned in Chapter One and then mentioned again in Chapter Twelve in a different way. I want people to have access to all this information by just scrolling around.

**Q:** So, our mutual friend, director Ryan White is currently finishing up a documentary regarding the San Francisco leather video Company, Palm Drive Video entitled [Raw! Uncut! Video!](#) Would you like to share a little bit about Palm Drive and its Mission its vision?

**JF:** Palm Drive video represented *Drummer* going from page to screen. *Drummer* was still shot, covers and centerfolds. There was certain look when I shot them for Palm Drive. A 70's look that changed in the 80's with HIV and Aids. I broke through the 4<sup>th</sup>



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**Q:** *You know it's interesting that you mention quarantine with AIDS and HIV with **Palm Drive Video** and now we find ourselves here in COVID19 quarantine. Are there any thoughts or ideas that you have for people who are in quarantine? Unfortunately a lot of the leather Community events have had to be canceled and I know some are doing online classes now and things like that but it sounds like you had a lot of great ideas at that time. Do you have any suggestions for people now?*

**JF:** Well, what I have to say during COVID is to give some hope, is that during quarantine art can still be created as long as you control the situation. Every Palm Drive Video I shot is a quarantine video. Video shot during the quarantine around HIV, remember it wasn't until the late 80's that you could get an HIV test so we had to presume the entire time I was shooting in the 80's. Not so much in the 90's, but I still kept that protocol going that everybody you came in contact with was positive so I stayed clear of them on the set and they could do what they were doing. But the point is that if we could create sex movies that were safe sex on set as well as teaching safe sex like solo sex at home, that the viewer can still have a date that's not going to contaminate him through what now would be video conferencing but was once a Palm Drive feature. You know if we could do it during AIDS, then we can do it during this COVID thing. Once we see basically how this COVID19 social distancing works out because sexual distancing is different.

Sometimes, just as a kind of footnote to this, people would write me or ask me and say, "Do you have sex with these guys? Don't you just want to just throw down the camera and have sex with them?" And I said, "Well I want to, but I never do, and never have because there's always a sex vibe on the camera. I wouldn't have invited them to be in front of my camera to work with me co-creating this art film, this erotic art film if I didn't feel that there was a sensual sexual connection between me on one side of the camera and them on the other side. But I always wanted that sex vibe to go directly into the camera. What good would it be if I filmed them and then threw the camera down and had sex with them and then try to finish the film? That would not be art; I think that would be a sin against art.

**Q:** *You mentioned to me that you're working on a new book now. Do you want to tell me a little bit about what you're working on now?*

**JF:** This book is part of a Drummer book series, and the title of the new forthcoming book is *Gay Popular Culture: Radical People, Arts, and Ideas*. It's about gay leather popular culture specifically, and what it is, is a collection of essays, separate articles I've written again. I put this book together on one topic or the other or most of them are about individual people like Cynthia Slater, or Larry Townsend or Hank Diethelm who was murdered in 1983 on this date and was the owner of the Brig bar which became the Powerhouse, and a cross section of the leather people from that first generation back in the Titanic 70's before the iceberg of HIV. Hopefully, this will be out before the end of 2020, I'm hoping for the Fall. It will be available for free right away. All these books are in paperback and on Kindle. For those who like to hold a book or who like Kindle. but for those who don't want to spend any money, and I don't blame them, or who want to do research against a bunch of books, they can go to my site and find all this for free because at my site there's all kinds of things that aren't even in these books about leather culture and leather history and leather art and leather folk.

**Q:** *I'm so honored and grateful that you took some time out of your Good Friday to speak with me I'm going to stop the interview now unless you have anything else, any final words that you like to add?*

**JF:** I would just like to say one thing because you asked how *Drummer* began. I would just like to say that for me it's been a 20-year dream come true to have Jack MacCullum restart *Drummer* in the 21st Century. And it was a particular joy when Jack asked me about the editing of the new *Drummer*, and I introduced him to my friend, Mike Michty as a person I thought should be the editor. So, I introduced the new publisher to the new editor, and it's been really rewarding. It feels really great to know that *Drummer* as a vehicle of leather culture can go on into this new decade and have centuries of all these new readers with these guys in charge because they're both doing a great job.



Photo: Ulli Richter, ullirichter.com

Links have been included in this interview for additional information. Please visit the following websites for more

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Photo: Ulli Richter, ulli.richter.com

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