

DRUMMER FEATURE ARTICLE

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2nd "REAR-VIEW MIRROR" ESSAY
INTERNATIONAL LEATHER HISTORY

**DIRT, DISH, TRUTH,
AND LITTLE WHITE LIES
BARS AND BIKES!
THE INCREDIBLE LIGHTNESS
OF BEING LEATHER
by Jack Fritscher**

- This entire feature article "... " is also available in Acrobat pdf.
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AUTHOR'S HISTORICAL CONTEXT INTRODUCTION



The feature article was written in November, 1988,
and published in *Drummer* 127, April 1988

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THE INCREDIBLE LIGHTNESS

From Amsterdam to New York, from Berlin to LA, from Houston to San Francisco, sex makes a man thirsty. Bars slake thirst. A pal takes a pal out for a drink. Historically, in the awakening Sodom-Oz of San Francisco, the sexual network of the Post-WWII 1950's South-of-Market workingmen's hotels banged out a code on the heat pipes that some bars were hotter than others.

Masculine homosexuality in San Francisco, in the late 50's, in a kind of male parthenogenesis (*virgin-birth*), without taking an ad out in the papers, dared to show its don't-fuck-with-me new face. A New-Attitude bar, Jack's On The Waterfront, along the Embarcadero, north of Market, and the Black Cat, also along the piers of the Embarcadero, South of Market, reared their butch heads and roared like Leo, MGM's trademark lion.

SOMEWHERE A PLACE FOR US

Anonymous underground secret sex, exactly like the secret societies of Masons, Moose, and Elks, decided it needed its own meeting place. Gravity sucks, and when sexuality is a man's gravitas, that gravity, as wordless and ancient as following a sexy man down a deserted street, caused the underground seekers and suckers, like the Roman Christians in the catacombs, to somehow, maybe with that sixth sense gay men have, come out, rise, and converge in places they can call their own: especially along seaport docks. (And, ha! Hasn't such convergence always been the great fear of every straight-bar owner that his pub might turn *queer*? As recently as the 1988 TV season, that fear fueled an episode of the otherwise liberal sit-com, *Cheers*.)

TELL THE JOE-BLOW YOU JUST BLEW

Just how does underground sex, London to Chicago, become institutionalized? Usually word-of-mouth. In the 50's and early 60's, savvy cabbies, who always know "what's hot and what's not," drove new guys looking for action, down to, say, Baghdad-by-the-Bay's Embarcadero, because the taxi-man knew the pier-side cruising eventually led to a drink; and to have a drink a man has to go to a bar where he can butch-flirt and make-out with some "audition" foreplay with his pick-up trick before taking him home to hit the horizontal High C's of the full *Ring Cycle*.

That very "word of mouth," because it was *oral*, and because it was always changing as modern gay sex invented itself, evaporated like summer night-voices into thin air. Bars came and went. Posters for bike runs disintegrated. Everything was underground and throw-away: especially the early gay news rags—all created in an age of manual typewriters and carbon paper, long before copy machines became a tool of gay lib. Princeton and Stanford anthropologists weren't exactly preserving the artifacts and events of our class-trash subculture; like everyone else they were down on their knees in the back-room toilets.

CAN YOU SAY, "LEATHER HISTORY," BOYS AND GIRLS?

Besides, in the age-old traditions of prejudice, homosexuality, nearly always

verboten throughout history could hardly leave an overground record of its forbidden self. After all, gaiety is lighter than air. That's why fairies can fly and disappear without a trace for their own protection.

But we're no longer afraid.

We're post-Stonewall.

The *A-Word* threatens us as an endangered species.

We want our history, which gives us our identity, told.

Thus the necessity to try now to piece together how the sub-sub-culture of homosexuality, *international leather*, ignited into the incredible lightness of being—both worldwide and especially in the leather-weather Mecca of San Francisco.

BUTCH ELEGANCE: LENNY'S 527, CHEZ MOLLET

In elegant San Francisco, by luck of blue-collar location, Jack's and the Black Cat emerged as the first Hot Spots for high-toned locals (with low-toned libidos) slumming down from Nob Hill, after supping at the piss-elegant Gordon's, to the rough facade of the Embarcadero piers. Both bars seemed to ignite simultaneously. While Jack's was for cruising and drinking, the Black Cat was the same—on the first floor; but downstairs in the basement, buddy, the first official "back room" was packed with nasty men in unzipped leather.

Hot on these archetypal butch bars' boot-heels, and much more self-consciously, 1960's bars, overtly catering to leather money and action, specifically "Lenny's 527" and "The Tool Box" were creating themselves out of the smell of leather and man-to-man sex in the air. Previous to "Lenny's 527," at 527 Bryant, South of Market, Lenny Mollet—a Brit who had served in the US Navy as a sailor—had pioneered along the waterfront the 50's gay bar and restaurant, Off the Levee, which, having previously been known as the Tin Angel, catered to the new wave of leather. The 527 Club [where I often ate steak with my long-time friend, the legendary Tony Tavarosi, who went back a thousand years with Lenny Mollet] later was named Chez Mollet, and was used by many gay and lesbian groups for meetings in its big dining hall. In 1980, John Dagion of *Trash* magazine and Old Reliable David Hurles, with Mark Hemry and me from *Man2Man* magazine, convened one of the first large and international meetings of erotic writers, artists, and photographers at Chez Mollet. [Lennie Mollet sold Chez Mollet in 1994, and died during surgery to repair an aneurysm at age 76, June 8, 1996.]

FROM PAYOLA TO GAYOLA

Cops, second only to queers, know where the action is. Cops always know a good "pay-off" when they see one. As word spread that Jack's and the Black Cat were the latest fag bars, more than once, the SFPD (same-ol/same-ol as every other PD in every other city, town, and village) was spotted dropping in to have "a little look around" and have their palms crossed with silver. Bar owners don't pay the Badges for protection when the protection isn't needed. The cops' arrival is the objective evidence that the Black Cat was a fully turned-out queer bar, and *a new-style tough masculine bar at that!* Some of the butch cops must have scratched their short-circuiting heads!

In 1969, the very young and blond Ron Ernst, not-yet-then the owner of Castro's landmark Jaguar Bookstore, was stopped outside the Black Cat by a cop who asked him, "Do you know what kind of bar you were in?"

Ron confesses he batted his lashes, hummed a chorus of “Over the Rainbow,” and flashed his military ID. Little did the cops or Ron know then what Ron would later do in pioneering the gay take-over of the Castro outpost with his cozy Jaguar back-room maze on 18th Street a few doors east of Castro.

Gayola, Ron said, was exposed by pioneer gay mover-and-shaker, publisher Bob Damron, who refused to pay off. Apparently, the new homomasculine crowd wasn’t cowed by cop bulls who were hardly a match for the new homo-machismo which was *the initial seed of militant gay politics* in San Francisco. The legendary Damron, single-handedly, stonewalled the cops long before New York’s 1969 Stonewall Bar revolution.

As a fuck-you-pig result, the SFPD suffered a minor scandal in the papers, and then for some years continued to be more discreet in their alleged payoffs from the fluff bars. San Francisco, despite Gayola, has never suffered as has LA with the kind of continual police harrassment that drove *Drummer*-founder, John Embry, from LA to SF because of his charitable fund-raiser “Slave Auction” which fascist LAPD Chief Ed Davis thought was *real* enough to bust everybody—including Embry—at the affair!

It was the same gay-bar-raiding Chief Davis’s boys-in-blue who arrested S&M-leather performance-artist Robert Opel, during the 70’s craze of “streaking,” for appearing naked at an LA City Council meeting to protest the closing of LA’s nude beaches. As a note of distinct clarification, Robert Opel is not to be confused historically with premiere American society photographer, Robert Mapplethorpe whose “Biker-for-Hire” graced the now-classic cover of *Drummer* 24. Somehow, the similarities of both artists’ names and fame created a “person” whom the confused public called “Robert Opelthorpe.” Go figure!

Robert Opel, having become a refugee from Ed Davis’ LA, opened the first leather art gallery South of Market, Fey Way, on Mission Street, in effect creating the high concept of SOMA art, performance, and society. S&M graphics and sculpture found a real home with spectacular “openings” where leather ladies and gents showed up for the drawings of artists the likes of Tom Hinde, Tom of Finland, Chuck Arnett, Rex, Hun, Lou Rudolph, and Robert Mapplethorpe.

Unfortunately, Robert Opel was murdered in his SOMA gallery in July, 1979. A premier leather-performance artist, Opel, who once enacted his shocking 20th-century Revenge Drama, “The Murder of Dan White,” in Civic Center Plaza by “shooting blanks from a hand gun,” was the “Most Naked Man in the World,” having streaked, in front of a billion people worldwide, live on the Oscars, making Elizabeth Taylor’s violet eye’s open wide, and making David Niven an instant, albeit inaccurate, wit, who jibed that Opel, naked, would always “be known for his short-comings.” Opel was actually quite nicely hung, but Niven had prepared a general remark, because he knew streaking was so popular, it was bound to hit the Oscars that year.

“It wasn’t,” Robert Opel told me, “streaking naked in front of a billion people that scared me. While I was hiding in the scenery, I was tangled up in about a thousand high-voltage wires.” [During the summer of 2001, I managed the research for the TNN TV network’s series, *Fame for 15*, which featured Robert Opel, as seen particularly by retired *Advocate* editor Mark Thompson, author of a biography of the multi-faceted Opel.]

A metaphor of all gay people is revealed in Opel’s statement: what has the media done, or will the media do, to electrify or electrocute our image and our history unless

we, as in this *Drummer* column, set the story, names, and dates—pardon the expression—straight? *Drummer* is, besides what it appears to be, the one lone publishing voice speaking out politically in fiction and features for the sub-sub-culture of the international leather community.

BOYS' CLUBHOUSE TO MEN'S BIKE CLUBS

Interviews with senior gay men confirm that the 1950's "new" crowd in Jack's and the Black Cat was almost a spontaneous combustion of sexual heat, all dressed up in leather with no place to go. The owners greeted the change, and the Black Cat, particularly, was well on its way to inventing the archetypal homo-masculine sex-bar style that grew to full flourish later in pube-pubs like the One-and-Only Tool Box.

Other bars followed suit: Febe's, the Wagon Wheel, the Red Star Saloon attached to the Barracks Bath, the Folsom Prison, the Ambush, and the Brig [later The Powerhouse] which, in its founding incarnation, as the No Name (home base for the most exclusive of bike clubs, The Rainbow MC), was the most sophisticated performance-art sleaze-pit of its day in the High 70's. The No Name was a full-tilt-boogie Orgy Pit from the front door to the back toilet and was the first leather bar to 86 the juke box for specially recorded acid-fuck tapes. Yet the Tool Box remains the prototype against which later evolving bars measured their authenticity. [In 1971 and 1972, Ron Johnson invited me to create "happenings" which later would be called "performance art." I used four projectors showing my Super-8 films of men as well as my slides of men while bodybuilder volunteers were carried in inside cages and were set on the bar itself for admiration. Some of these slides and films were later used at several of Wakefield Poole's mass parties.]

Gay men's best invention has always been ourselves and our sexually-charged environments and art: bars and baths, books, graphics, and high-flying sex-acts performed without nets.

Tune in next issue. The first Bike Clubs and Runs. Will there be trouble in Paradise?

(*Drummer* Editor's Note: Next *Drummer* issue, check out this "Rear View Column" to pick up our S&M SOMA "International Leather History" with the founding of the Bike Clubs and tales of the legendary Tool Box. As *Drummer* collects the "One-and-Only Official History of International Leather," *WE NEED YOU* for factual accuracy, dates, anecdotes, and photos! Fritscher and Johnson are collecting our Oral History from men and women who lived it.

If you have a story to tell, a fact to add (or correct), photos to share about bars, early bike runs, bike clubs, S&M scenes, the first leather, whatever, send a note to Fritscher/Johnson, c/o *Drummer*, or c/o Palm Drive, PO Box 193653, San Francisco 94119. We'll contact you, and your story can become part of *Drummer's* International Leather History!)

ILLUSTRATIONS

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