

Drummer's Institutional Memory

Mark Hemry, Editor

“The past is a foreign country...”
—L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*

“What happened in 1977 could fill a book.
We hired A. Jay’s friend
Jack Fritscher as editor in chief...”
—John Embry, founding publisher of *Drummer*,
Drummer 188 (September 1995), 20th Anniversary Issue

- The *Drummer* Salon: A Gathering of the Right People in the Right Place at the Right Time
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- *Drummer's Institutional Memory: Robert Mapplethorpe and Edward Lucie-Smith*
- *Rashomon* and *The Alexandria Quartet*

Jack Fritscher, the founding San Francisco editor in chief of *Drummer* magazine, met John Embry, the founding Los Angeles publisher, in March 1977, and worked with him, and observed him, during nearly thirty years, including three years as editor in chief and for twenty years after their *Drummer* partnership, writing for Embry’s twenty-first-century magazines *Manifest Reader*, *Manhood Rituals*, and *Super MR*.

In 1986, as Anthony F. DeBlase was purchasing *Drummer* from Embry, he asked Fritscher to return as editor in chief. As an alternative, Fritscher continued to contribute writing, photographs, and issue themes to *Drummer*, even after DeBlase sold the magazine in 1992 to Martijn Bakker, the publisher from Amsterdam who shut *Drummer* down in 1999.

Only two people were editor in chief of *Drummer*: Jeanne Barney and Jack Fritscher.

I myself have been an eyewitness of Fritscher and *Drummer* since 1979. In fact, I met Fritscher at the precise moment in May 1979 when he had edited half the *Drummer* issues in existence.

Fritscher was the marquee editor in chief of *Drummer* for thirty-two intense and seminal months: March 1977 to December 31, 1979. During

this formative time, he edited and signed *Drummer* 19-30 as well as his unsigned hybrid issues *Drummer* 14-18, and 31-33, plus his special extra issue of New York art, *Son of Drummer* (September 1978). He kept steady through the *sturm und drang* of all three owner-publishers: John Embry, Anthony F. DeBlase, and Martijn Bakker. Fritscher was *Drummer's* most frequent contributing writer and photographer for 65 of the 214 issues during three publishers over 24 years

Embry hired Fritscher conceptually as the “founding San Francisco editor in chief of *Drummer*.”

By “founding San Francisco editor in chief,” Embry, who was new to the city, meant the deeply established Fritscher was to be his San Francisco talent scout discovering and recruiting a new group of contributors, ideas, and themes for *Drummer* orphaned in LA. The legendary Sam Steward, who was an intimate in the charmed circle around Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, dubbed the 1970s group Fritscher collected as “The *Drummer* Salon.”

Fritscher is the historian of *Drummer's* institutional memory.

During those 24 years of Fritscher’s surveillance of *Drummer* as editor in chief, writer, and photographer, the three publishers’ feuds with each other—each with his blacklist—destroyed the very institutional memory of *Drummer*. Out of the cabals and brawls, Fritscher was the one, single, longtime, and very inside eyewitness left standing.

Over 24 years, he observed *Drummer* for 2.5 times longer than John Embry, the founding owner and publisher who worked with *Drummer* for only 11 years, and fought with it for 14 years. DeBlase toyed with *Drummer* for 6 years; Bakker killed *Drummer* in an assisted suicide that took 6 years.

Arts critic John F. Karr wrote in the *Bay Area Reporter*, June 27, 1985: “Fritscher invented the South of Market prose style and its magazines which would not be the same without him.”

Planetout.com defined Fritscher as “the groundbreaking editor of *Drummer* magazine.”

The Gay and Lesbian Historical Society mentioned: “Fritscher is the prolific author who since the late sixties has helped document the gay world and the changes it has undergone.”

Memory may fragment with time; but Fritscher’s germinal reflection restores the institutional memory timeline of *Drummer* with dates, and more importantly with the streaming flow of life, feeling, and blood with which he connects the dots of incident, calendar, clock, and personalities into a useful reminiscence of a

lost civilization. His eyewitness testimony is supported by internal evidence from an array of public and private archived documents.

Spoken by a pioneer-participant, this *Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer* text is oral history written down for remembrance. It is a personal memoir ricocheting off Gertrude Stein's *Everybody's Autobiography*. Fritscher insists, "There are several other autobiographical eyewitness stories to be told about *Drummer* by others from their own experience. I can't tell them all; I don't know them all; but I welcome them all."

As a teenager, he was impressed by L. P. Hartley's 1953 novel *The Go-Between*. Hartley was schooled at Oxford where Fritscher studied briefly. As a tenured associate professor teaching university classes titled Creative Writing, American Literature, and Esthetics of Cinema, he lectured on the screen play of *The Go-Between* (1970) written by Harold Pinter and directed by Joseph Losey who had been blacklisted as a Communist by the House Un-American Activities Committee. "That HUAC witch hunt, that opening salvo of the culture war," he says, "was run by Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy who was the progenitor of Jesse Helms who crucified Robert Mapplethorpe, and of Carl Rove and the neocons kneeling on their right-wing prayer rugs."

Hartley's famous first line in both his book and the Pinter-Losey film of *The Go-Between* is: "The past is a foreign country; they did things differently there." Having kept a journal since he was seventeen in early 1957, Fritscher in 1970 began writing entries of the "foreign gay past" as it happened before it was past and while it was not foreign to him as eyewitness. These entries were integral to his signature novel, the 1990 Lambda Literary Award Finalist, *Some Dance to Remember: A Memoir-Novel of San Francisco 1970-1982*. As a humanist, he wrote his essentialist "opening line": "In the end he could not deny his human heart."

In 1988, he began his *Drummer* 133 "Pentimento" salute to his bicoastal lover Robert Mapplethorpe: "The pre-AIDS past of the 1970s has become a strange country. We lived life differently a dozen years ago."

What of the past is written in Fritscher's *Eyewitness Drummer* history is not a fiction. He allows, however, that its "truth is, of course, *Rashomon*. In that 1950 film, director Akira Kurosawa told the same story from four points of view."

As a college student who graduated in 1961, Fritscher also idolized *The Alexandria Quartet* written by Lawrence Durrell between 1957 and 1960.

"Durrell wrote one story," Fritscher says, "told from four different points of view. He exhibits the human degrees of relativity—the six

degrees of separation. He dramatizes how his four characters can experience the same thing and come away with contradictory truths. *The Alexandria Quartet* adds a quantum time-folding twist to *Rashomon*. Besides each Durrell character having his or her own point of view, each over time is changing his or her point of view. How very like us survivors of the Titanic 70s after the iceberg of HIV.”

In August 1963, while waiting near a military hospital for his first nephew to be born in Washington, DC, Fritscher re-read *The Alexandria Quartet* in Alexandria, Virginia.

“It was one Alexandria,” he said, “of the several which Durrell recommended as ideal places to read his *Quartet*.”

Fritscher completed the four books, *Justine*, *Balthazar*, *Mountolive*, and *Clea* before and after participating in Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” March on Washington.

On July 31, 1990, *The Advocate* published a review of *Some Dance to Remember*. Reviewer David Perry cheered the sweep and scope of that memoir-novel. I quote it here because Perry’s description of that book aptly describes the scope of *Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer*.

For 562 pages, the 51-year-old author lays out stories from what he calls the Castro’s Golden Age (1970-1982) in the recently released novel, *Some Dance to Remember*. Heady, erotic, comic, and often boggling for the sheer weight of information it contains, Fritscher’s novel is the first comprehensive fictional chronicle of the best of times bleeding into the worst.

Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer is a kind of oral history told by a *seanachie* who repeats bits that reveal more with each telling. (A *seanachie* is an Irish storyteller, a keeper of the village tales.) Fritscher, a wordsmith with ancestral blood roots in Ireland, knows his way around a story.



“Bull Rider Mark Hemry,” Gay Rodeo, Reno, 1979. Photograph by Jack Fritscher. ©Jack Fritscher

Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer is *Some Dance to Remember* with real people.

In 1992, when Fritscher was writing his historical memoir of life with his bicoastal lover, Robert Mapplethorpe, the British critic Edward Lucie-Smith told him that it was unfortunate that Mapplethorpe had never written a monograph explaining what he was trying to do in his photography. Edward Lucie-Smith told Fritscher, “In that is a lesson about your own involvement as a writer and a photographer in *Drummer* and in gay culture.”

—Mark Hemry, editor

Youth needs the wisdom of the established, and the established need the energy of the young. The present usually takes a dim view of the past. This attitude is attractive to the naive who often think that the whole wide world began the day they first noticed it. Sometimes, too, people with some mileage wrongly dismiss the younger because the young weren't present at the past.

—Jack Fritscher, Introduction to Larry Townsend's *The Leatherman's Handbook*

**American Editor:
From Prof to Pop—From University to Diversity
(What People Like)¹⁰⁰**

In the Prague Spring of 1968 with student revolutions sweeping the world, university professor Jack Fritscher was a founding member of the American Popular Culture Association that was invented to introduce diversity to American Studies, and he was one of the first contributors to the *Journal of Popular Culture*. In July 1978, he added to the masthead of *Drummer* 23 the high-concept tag line, “The American Review of Gay Popular Culture.” When asked why a tenured academic would become involved with *Drummer*, Fritscher emailed:

Why did I choose to throw in my lot with *Drummer* in 1977? Because in pre-Stonewall 1968, I realized the potential transgressive value of gay publishing. Gay pop culture was coming out of the closet in the 1960s the way Black culture and Beat culture had come out in the 1950s. Pop culture is what ordinary people like. I figured attention must be paid.

As an eyewitness, I was a tenured and openly gay professor, and I announced to editors of academic journals that I was available with dual credentials as both a cultural arts critic and an erotic participant to document our 1960s gay culture. With people like Bella Abzug, I toured as a speaker in college-campus lecture series, and wrote essays (such as “Originality in *The Boys in the Band*”) for the newly founded *Journal of Popular Culture* edited by PCA founder Ray Browne. His Popular Culture Press at Bowling Green University contracted in 1969 to publish my *Popular Witchcraft: Straight from the Witch’s Mouth* which was the first book to discuss gay magic and leather ritual.

Soon enough, along came Stonewall and the Titanic 1970s with gay liberation and *Drummer* begging for air pressure, content, self-discovery, and identity.

I groomed *Drummer* to reflect the readers who identified themselves and what they liked in thousands of their personals ads. The perfect demographic. *Drummer* was the people’s magazine, at least among a million masculine-identified leatherfolk worldwide.

In its mission statement (www.msu.edu/~tjpc/), *The Journal of Popular Culture* has articulated concepts that help explain the reader-reflexive, grass-roots, and *erotica verite* principles of the first-person, dialog-driven, documentary scenes that Fritscher as analytical editor in chief and New Journalism author introduced into *Drummer*, into his popular culture memoir-novel *Some Dance to Remember*, and into *Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer*.

The popular culture movement was founded on the principle that the perspectives and experiences of common folk offer compelling insights into the social world. The fabric of human social life is not merely the art deemed worthy to hang in museums, the books that have won literary prizes or been named “classics,” or the religious and social ceremonies carried out by societies’ elite. *The Journal of Popular Culture* continues to break down the barriers between so-called “low” and “high” culture and focuses on filling in the gaps a neglect of popular culture has left in our understanding of the workings of society.